what's a future worth?

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what's a future worth?

by Anonymous

Summary

Charlie's got a reputation.

Or, he did, before stupid Cameron took the wrong notebook into chemistry and read all of the stupid journaling Charlie had pretended not to have done about Knox, and stood there, in their dorm, threatening him with exposition.

Chapter 1: about the sonnets

It's-- look. it's not that Charlie's mad at Knox, never that. it's more that -- well, Knox can't shut up about all the merits of love poems in an age increasingly focused on sports, and that's Knox, no harm no foul. but Charlie's kind of noticing that of all the love poems that Charlie reads to the society, none of them refer to him. or, more accurately, all of them describe some blonde girl he met at a dinner party, which, in Charlie's humble opinion, is the single lamest place to meet someone.

But, he digresses.

Either way, despite how he can't meet Knox's eyes for about an hour after society meetings, he's not going to tell anyone, not even ever empathetic Neil, about his stupid crush. This is a problem between Charlie and Nuwanda, as far as he's concerned, and is therefore his business exclusively. and besides, he's got a reputation.

Or, he did, before stupid Cameron took the wrong notebook into chemistry and read all of the stupid journaling Charlie had pretended not to have done, and stood there, in their dorm, threatening him with exposition.

Charlie puts his hands in his pockets and pretends to not care as Cameron rants to him about the moral failings that were apparently inherent in falling for your best friend. There are none, Charlie thinks as he listens, Cameron is just really damned homophobic.

"Look, bud," Charlie cut him off, "I don't know if you've been paying attention at all to what Keating implies about Whitman, but the general modern consensus that boys liking boys is not a problem. Give me back my notebook." Cameron only held it further away.

"What if I tell your dad?" He says, like a shithead. "That'll probably get you expelled." Which, shit, because that was definitely the worst-case scenario.

"Dude, come on." Charlie says, "Why do you care? It doesn't affect you at all--"

"I don't want to have to see that lifestyle at a school that prides itself on traditional values," Cameron says very matter-of-factly. Seriously, Charlie thinks, does this kid understand the Dead Poets Society at all? When the hell have they abided by traditional values?

"What do you want from me? It's not like I've been obvious about it."

"If you stop making fun of me, and all the other stuff, maybe I won't tell anyone," Cameron says, with maybe the most infuriating grin possible. Really, Charlie thinks when he remembers his dad's choice comments at mealtimes, does he even have a choice?

And that's how Charlie went from among the freest of the Dead Poets to shackled by Cameron's omnipotent shadow. He stopped bringing the saxophone to study halls because Cameron raised his eyebrows at him and pointedly looked at his stationary. He stopped pressing up against Knox in the cold Dead Poets Cave because Cameron eyed their closeness and cleared his throat. He stopped deliberately giving wrong answers to Keating, not because of Cameron, but because he stopped feeling like himself, without his bravado but with a constant threat over his head. It's not that he hadn't thought of the consequences of loving Knox, but now that stupid, traditional, buzzkill Cameron knew, the consequences seemed, for the first time, real. (Cameron doesn't want to hold the meetings every week. He thinks they should happen once a month. "Yeah, I guess, same," Charlie says, looking at Cameron's shoes, to the incredulity of his friends. The meetings dwindle in number after that.)

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It was about a week and a half of constantly looking over his shoulder for the worst of his friends when he is stopped on his way across the courtyard by Meeks.

"What is good, my fine friend," he begins, fully prepared to bullshit his way out of Meeks' concern. It doesn't look like it works.

"What's wrong?" Meeks asks, removing Charlie's arm from where he had slung it over his shoulder.

"Nothing wrong. Busy week. Latin sucks." Frankly, Charlie is offended his smile is not alleviating Meeks' concern.

"You're not being yourself," Meeks says, unimpressed.

"What is the self?" Charlie answers. It's better that he misquotes poets than be honest, he thinks.

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Neil tries to talk to him, during a study hall, which is stupid because

it's been three weeks and Charlie was actually kind of distracted for once, having a paper sword fight with Meeks, Todd, and Knox.

"Dalton!" Neil calls, and Charlie gets so caught off guard that Knox disarms him, grabs his wrist, and twists it behind his back.

"Not fair Neil!" Charlie responds, before stamping on Knox's foot in an attempt to get free. It doesn't work. Knox brings his paper sword up to Charlie's neck, keeps it there, and Charlie grins at Neil. Some things are worse than losing a paper sword fight. Charlie decides that to talk to Neil about feelings is one of those things, so he taps twice at Knox's arm, picks his sword up, and pats Neil on the shoulder.

"Give me a minute, I've got a rematch calling my name." Neil looks between him and Knox, then joins Pitts in working on what is undoubtedly the history essay due next week.

"En garde !" Charlie shouts, attacking Knox with renewed vigor and ignoring the way his face heats up when he loses again.

Neil gets him eventually, when they're the last two getting ready for bed, but he doesn't make him talk. He looks him in the eye, gives him a small smile, and pulls him into a hug. Burying his head in Neil's shoulder, Charlie thinks about how old Neil seems sometimes, and feels a lump in his throat.

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Detention, when he serves it for not doing the history essay, is terrible. Not only because it's insufferably boring, but also because Knox is there with him, for getting caught on the roof, and he’s staring so deliberately at Charlie that he’s having a really hard time ignoring it. And that also sucks, because any other time, he would revel in Knox's undivided attention, but now all he can see is his dad's face condemning "unnatural men" and telling him to stay away from "those kinds of folks." It's kind of hard, he thinks, to stay away from himself.

"Are you mad at me?" Knox asks, after a while. Charlie finally turns to look at him.

"I'm not-- no, I'm not mad at you."

"Then why are you ignoring me?" Knox asks, leaning back in his chair and kind of challenging Charlie with his gaze. Charlie shifts a bit in

his seat.

"I'm also not ignoring you," he says, not meeting Knox's eyes. "I've been really busy." He can still feel Knox staring at him.

"What?" he asks, defensive. Knox shakes his head and doesn't reply, but Charlie still kind of wants to cry.

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It's a Friday night, and they're all supposed to be going home for a three day weekend, but Charlie's parents are off in London and Knox's are in Prague. It's a Friday night, and Charlie accidentally sees Neil and Todd kissing in the shadow of an arch in the rain.

Charlie doesn't look for long, but he feels a part of his chest unlodge at the sight, as Todd pulls back and laughs, wraps his arms around Neil, and Neil ruffles Todd's hair and kisses his head.

They look really, truly happy, Charlie thinks as he walks back to his and Cameron's dorm, and it makes Charlie think he could be happy too. That he was right in saying it's not wrong to love another boy, that it's not unnatural, and that maybe he could kiss boys, too, and his dad didn't have to know. He stands at the top of the stairs after climbing them for a minute, just breathing, before turning the corner to walk towards his room. The lamps that light the corridor gild the ceiling like they haven't done for about a month, since Cameron threatened him. The windows glitter with rain like they're crystals, and Charlie smiles without anyone watching him.

When he opens the door to his room, Cameron isn't there, he's gone home, but Knox, very conspicuously, is. Charlie greets him with a genuine smile.

"Let's go on the roof," Knox says, and Charlie really looks at him, for the first time in a month, and wonders how he refrained for a whole thirty days.

When they've climbed from the bridge to the roof of a hallway, the rain has stopped, but Knox still lays his blazer on the ground so they don't get wet, ("To hell with the blazer, I guess," Charlie teases, earning a shove from Knox.) They sit down really close together, on account of the blazer only being made to fit one person's shoulders. They stare at the sky for a little, before Charlie announces, "I'm never rooming with Cameron ever again, I swear to God." Knox raises an eyebrow.

"Too much of a goody-two-shoes, is he?"

"He doesn't appreciate my sax, is the thing." and Knox erupts into raucous laughter and Charlie really does feel like himself.

When the two quiet down, Charlie's face heats up because Knox keeps looking between him and the sky.

"What?" Charlie asks.

"Nothing," Knox says. "I missed you."

"I didn't leave," Charlie says, but he knows you don't have to be gone to be missed. "I missed you too." He says.

"Was it me?" Knox asks, and Charlie's heart really hurts. He doesn't ask what Knox means, but answers, "No."

"What was wrong?" Charlie looks at Knox, who looks at the stars that have begun to light. "Was it Cameron?" Knox asks again, and Charlie says "Yeah."

"What was it -- you don't have to tell me -- but what did he do?"

"He read something I wrote."

"Was it -- what was it about?"

Charlie thinks of how to answer, then says, "You know what they say, about Shakespeare and about Wilde?"

"Like about the sonnets?" Knox asks.

"Yeah, about the sonnets."

Knox is quiet for a bit. Charlie looks at him, and he looks at Charlie. Charlie uncurls his hands from around his knees and lays back against the roof, his hands behind his head.

"Did you give your poems to that girl?" Charlie asks, to break the silence.

"What girl?" asks Knox.

"The blonde one. From your poems."

"There's not a blonde girl anymore," Knox says, and Charlie looks at

him as he also lies back, one arm outstretched to his side and the other thrown over his eyes.

"Oh," Charlie says. He doesn't ask why.

"There's someone else, though," Knox says, and Charlie's stomach kind of jumps, a bit.

"Who is she?" Charlie asks, to cut the tension. It doesn't work, because Knox doesn't start waxing poetic about some new girl's hair or eyes or smile, like Charlie expected him to, but instead he opens one eye and looks, really looks, at Charlie. Charlie feels like his heart is in his throat and doesn't get why it's beating so fast, and he knows that his eyes are probably the size of the moon and the problem, he thinks, with Knox not talking about his new girl is that Charlie's heart isn't breaking, and that's unfair because now his stupid heart has hope, really has hope, and it's hard to breathe all of the sudden and Knox won't stop looking at him and now there's so much tension the air feels solid, and the moon and the trees and the sky can't draw his eyes away from Knox's, and then Knox kind of licks his lips a little and now Charlie can't stop looking at them, and his eyes kind of go hooded, he thinks, and, and, and --

And then either Charlie is passing out or Knox is getting closer, and honestly, Charlie can't decide which is more likely when he thinks apparently it's the latter, as Knox leans up on one elbow and brushes one hand along Charlie's jaw. Charlie really can't stop looking at Knox's lips, still, and then Knox stops moving closer, and they're kind of sharing the same air and Charlie's heart is so loud and so fast and so high up in his chest, and, and, and then --

"Can I?" Knox whispers, and Charlie manages to nod, and finally, they're kissing, and Charlie's head goes white, and it's so, so good, because his hands are finally in Knox's hair and Knox's hands are on his jaw and his neck, and it's like the entire damn world is spinning except for the two of them, and he feels dizzy and blissfully happy.

When they break apart, Charlie gets why Todd laughed in the courtyard, because he really can't stop smiling, and he shoves Knox a bit and shouts,

"Fucking finally!" and then both he and Knox are laughing, and then Knox is dragging him up so they're both seated and then they're kissing again, and it's not really good because they're both smiling too hard, but when they break apart, Charlie's hands are looped around

Knox's neck and he smiles really hard into Knox's shoulder.
Knox starts to pet his hair, which is really nice, and Charlie feels him lean his cheek against Charlie's head.

"It's not a girl," mumbles Knox into Charlie's hair. Charlie shoots up so fast he accidentally knocks Knox's jaw. He kisses it to make it better, then says,
"Wait, you wrote me poetry?" and Knox rolls his eyes and pulls him back in for another quick kiss and then holds him again and says, "Obviously, Dalton, don't be stupid."

"Nuwanda to you," Charlie mutters as he drags Knox back into another kiss.

When it starts to get cold, and the rainwater seeps into Knox's blazer, they get up, holding hands, and retreat back to Charlie and Cameron's room, on Charlie's bed. Staring at Cameron's stupid orange and green quilt, with his back pressed against Knox's front, Charlie isn't deluded into thinking there's no longer going to be a problem, but he's got Knox, now, holding him, and he knows Neil and Todd are happy, too. Maybe they'll talk to Neil and Todd in the morning, Charlie decides, before rolling over to give Knox another kiss.

"You want to sleep here?" he asks, and at Knox's eyebrow wiggling, groans. "Not what I meant and you know it. Take me for dinner first," and then Knox kisses him and says "Yes, dear," and he knows he's kind of teasing him but also knows he's kind of not, which makes him really happy, which is cheesy, but what can you do.

Later, when they're ready for bed, and Charlie's already winked at Neil in the bathroom, to his utter bafflement and later embarrassment, Charlie snuggles into Knox's shoulder and shoves him when Knox makes a really obnoxious cooing sound. It's kind of hard to push someone you're half on top of, and Charlie only moves further into Knox's personal space afterward, so his point is null, but, again, what can you do. Knox cards his fingers through Charlie's hair as he's beginning to drift off, and Charlie's last thought is that he's sure he's never been happier in his life.

Chapter 2: Dearest, Charlotte

Chapter Summary

When visiting his Great-Aunt Charlotte's estate upstate, Charlie begins to formulate a plan.

It starts with a letter.

Chapter Notes

Okay so I know this isn't as much Chox as we all would want, but I've actually come up with a cohesive plot for this story! So expect more chapters in the future, and go ahead and thank my friend for pressuring me into it.

Happy Belated Birthday, Dipshit #1.

Fair warning -- this chapter deals with more period-typical homophobia, and references suicide, which is off-screen. If that's triggering, please do not read this chapter.

I wish you all the best!

Charlie runs his thumb over the corner of the photograph in his pocket, even though it might rip. He's sitting up straighter than he usually does, in the passenger seat of his dad's black car, as they peel away from Welton. He should relax, ask his dad about his work, maybe talk about his studies, but he doesn't. He stares at the brick of the school as it disappears behind new, spring trees. He can't help but think of Knox, probably not paying attention in Chemistry, as his finger dulls the edge of the polaroid.

It's a cute picture, taken just last weekend, of him and Knox. In it, Knox hugs Charlie to his side while laughing as Charlie cheers, having succeeded in dirting Knox's hair with sand from the lake. It's ridiculously sappy and candid, and Charlie decided to bring it with him last minute, though he'll be absolutely screwed if his dad found it. He remembers laughing as Knox complained, later, about the sand still in his hair after showering. He doesn't know how he's going to get through five days without Knox laughing at him.

In a few hours, he'll be at some estate he's never heard of, saying goodbye to his sick great-aunt Charlotte, who he's never met, spending most of his week talking to relatives who don't know him like his friends do, and he'll be in crisp, stuffy suits and pressed shirts, pinchy shoes and cufflinks. He'll look ridiculous. He wants to turn to Knox and complain, maybe shove his face into Knox's shoulder, be dramatic and over-the-top, get consoled and petted, but Knox is in Chemistry, and Charlie's desperate not to disappoint his father this week.

Charlie's dad merges into a street lined, now, with buildings, not trees. The sun looks closer to the center of the sky. *Keep your splendid, silent sun,* Charlie thinks, as he sees people walk into restaurants and walk, laughing, on the sidewalk, then mentally pats himself on the back for retaining even a little bit of poetry from english. See, Keating? He's a stellar student. Maybe if he lies about an English test on Friday his dad will let him leave the estate early.

One look at his dad convinces him out of it. His dad's knuckles are white against the steering wheel, his gaze set on the road ahead of him, so Charlie leans back against the seat, blows hair off of his forehead, and lets his eyes flit from building to building as the car passes.

By the time they make it upstate, it's well into the afternoon. The driveway is circular, like they always are in too-expensive, sprawling, old-money homes, and the house itself is ugly -- made of stone and red brick, asymmetrical and over-the-top, even from the outside.

The inside is even worse. The foyer is big, faded, and with ancient seats, and it's drafty, with two twin staircases leading to upstairs halls. Various rooms lay behind wooden doors, but Charlie's mom, having gotten to the home in the morning, leads Charlie to a guest room instead of letting him explore.

If Charlie thought the foyer was ugly, the guest room he's staying in

for the better part of next week is a whole other level. The blankets look dusty, the curtains are ornate, faded gold, and heavy, the floor is carpeted, (why?) and the bed frame is intricate wrought iron, for some godforsaken reason. Charlie sets down his suitcase and considers pulling out a sheet of stationary to complain about the state of the house in a letter, but doesn't want to unpack quite yet.

Staying in the room is suffocating, Charlie decides after ten minutes, so he starts to wander the halls looking for the kitchen. He figures it ought to be on the lower floor, but as he begins to weave amongst the halls and connecting rooms, he gets turned around and can't find the staircase.

Eventually, he makes it to what seems like the north wing of the house, in a large, circular room, probably the master bedroom, with a four-poster bed and a large bay window overlooking a neat field of grass below. The room is wallpapered with a light golden floral pattern, but littered with huge, boring paintings and photographs and gold-framed mirrors. The dark wood furniture is just big and intricate enough to make the room seem cramped, but Charlie doesn't hate it the way he hates the rest of the house. He crosses the room to the bay window, runs his hands over the desk with the built-in hutch, and, on a whim, opens a curved drawer, fully expecting to find, like, dust.

Instead, he finds stacks upon stacks of letters.

Look. Charlie doesn't consider himself *that* nosy of a person. That doesn't stop him from opening a letter a few letters from the top of one of the stacks.

Dearest, Charlotte,

I implore you to return to me. Come north at the first available opportunity; you know well that I miss you desperately, I have lost my cordiality, my poise, and I'm bleeding, Charlotte, in your absence. I am incomplete, mad, now, without you.

Charlotte, I find you in everything I love. I cannot dress without remembering your hands on my chemise, I cannot touch that blue china without remembering your lips on the cup and on mine. Darling, I find myself searching for you in my garden, on your favorite bench, though you aren't here. I, the skeptic, have become paranoid without you. I think your love has made me mad. You have drawn me from my comfort and innocence -- to think I was concerned with such silly things as evening gowns just last summer ! Now I feel as though I am terribly missing a limb.

I cannot accurately express -- Charlotte, I fear I'll lose my mind completely if I don't see you soon. You promised you'd come back to me, Dear, it's been weeks. My mother tells me I seem pale. I fear it is from your absence. You have stained me, ruined me, haunted me, kissed divinity into my soul and left me wanting. You carved my heart out and held it close, and it was impossible and beautiful, but now, without you, now it just hurts

Charlotte -- Charlotte, Charlotte, Charlotte. I love you like the ocean loves water and I hate you like fire hates brimstone. Who told you it was fair to kiss me in the library and in enclaves in halls, then rearrange your skirts and leave? Who gave you consent to crawl into the yawning abyss of my love and light a fire there? I didn't ! How dare you !

I wonder who I could have been if you had not reduced me to a woman -- girl, chasing, still, the thrill of your clandestine eyes on me. Married already, to that John fellow, probably. It would have been safer.

I suppose you always said the worst thing to be is safe.

Why then, don't you write back to me?

I saw you at Cordelia's coming out party two weekends ago. You left before I could say hello. I could leave too. I could take a ship to London, next week if I so chose, and leave you behind. I could, but I won't. If you know anything about me, you know I don't have it in me to say goodbye to you, Charlotte. Come back to me, come back to me, come back to me, please, please, please. The world is grey when you aren't here. You desaturated my senses of the world so you could ignite them around you.

Do write back. I am afraid I've spilled my whole heart on this page, and will be terribly embarrassed if I've stained it with my terrible longing, only for it to go unread, or worse, ignored.

All the terrible, Great love in the world,

Your Mary.

The letter read.

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It's been a few hours since Charlie somehow made it back to his room, the letter still in his hands, reeling. He found a phone in one of the rooms, and it should be close to down time at Welton, so he should really call Knox, but..

But he can't stop thinking about that letter. It's not remarkable, except that it's a love letter, by a woman, addressed to his great-aunt. And that means -- that means his dad's aunt loved a woman, and so he's not alone in this family, and -- did anyone else in the family know? And is it possible that they did know, and they were okay with it? And if they were, is there a possibility that his dad would be okay with Charlie? Because if he was, if his dad was okay with him, that would mean --

Well, that would mean he wouldn't have to keep looking over his shoulder for Cameron at school. And that would mean that there might be a future for him and Knox, outside of Welton.

Even the concept had seemed ludicrous before today. It fills Charlie with a buoyant hope he hadn't felt since forever.

When his father stops by his room to remind him to dress nice for dinner, Charlie smiles at him for the first time since he started Welton.

Dinner is boring, and long, so Charlie sneaks out when the table clears and his relatives start getting up to talk and mingle. He wanders along the downstairs rooms until he finds a phone on the wall, and he calls Welton and asks for Knox.

“Hi, Dalton.” Knox says. Charlie smiles into the phone and presses it closer to his ear. “Hello, Overstreet.” he says. “Tell me about class today.”

“Um, Chemistry was boring, obviously. English was quiet, I would have smoked you in our pop quiz in Latin today. Since when do you care about school?” Knox says.

“I want you to know how absolutely serious I am when I say school beats this stuffy grave of a house.” Charlie responds. “Also, bragging rights don’t count when it comes to Latin. The toupee on McAllister’s head would beat me in a Latin quiz.”

“Hmm.” Knox says sagely, then after a few moments, says: “I didn’t think you were going to call today.”

“Why?” Asks Charlie. “I told you I would.”

“It’s late.”

“I know. But I got lost and found something.” Charlie says. “A love letter.”

“Okay so my question is: why does the grave house have a love letter and I don’t?” Knox teases.

“Maybe the grave house is prettier than you.” Charlie says. Knox pretends to be offended via a gasp over the phone, and Charlie can *see* the hand Knox undoubtedly lays, dramatically, over his heart. It hurts how much he misses Knox.

Now I feel as though I am terribly missing a limb, the letter had read. Charlie understands -- he had been pretty much glued to Knox since that fateful rainy night, and though it hasn't even been twenty-four hours, his heart has become a lost puppy, looking for Knox again and again. He feels stupid, but apparently love is a kind of insanity, according to this Mary woman, so he lets it go.

"So why are we using precious phone time to talk about a love letter that's *not addressed to me?* " Knox says, and if he was here, Charlie would shove him. He settles for blowing into the receiver and is rewarded with Knox's sputtering.

"I mean, I don't exactly know what my plan is, but it might mean -- I mean endgame, it could mean that eventually, I won't have to care about Cameron calling my dad." He says, and hears Knox sober up.

"Are you serious? What kind of -- really?" Knox asks.

"I mean, I don't know. It could." There's definitely a tension bubbling up in Charlie's stomach because there's kind of a lot that's going unsaid in this phone call. First of all, Knox should probably know the letter was between two women, seeing as that's why it's important, but Charlie doesn't want to risk telling him in case someone comes listening at the door. And Knox should know that Charlie's endgame plan is a future for them after Welton, but the issue with that is -- and Charlie's just thinking of this now -- what if Knox doesn't want it? What if Knox just wants their relationship to be a coming-of-age, schoolboy thing? Knox is romantic, and Charlie is flirty, so what if Knox doesn't think it's going to last?

That question raises gooseflesh on Charlie's arms. Knox, oblivious, asks: "How?"

“Um, I don’t know --” Charlie says.

“How much do you know?”

“Kind of more than I can say here.”

“Why?”

“First of all, I’m supposed to be at a family dinner.”

“ *Awwwwww,* you skipped a family dinner for me?”

“I’d skip a family dinner for a quarter.” Knox gasps.

“ *AWWWWWWWWW,* I’m worth a whole quarter to you? You’re like, a nickel at best!” Knox says, like the asshole that he is. Charlie laughs.

“It better be a damn good nickel. A collectible. A Shield Nickel, freshly minted and shiny.”

“How do you even know what a Shield Nickel is?”

“Would you believe me if I said I collected them myself?”

“Charlie, you can’t keep a pencil for more than a week --”

“Week and a half, probably,” Charlie protests

“-- A week.”

“I’ll have you know I haven’t taken *one* pencil from Meeks all semester.”

“ *Yeah, that’s ‘cause he bought you fifty-five pencils for Christmas.* ”

Charlie is conspicuously and uncharacteristically silent.

“Don’t tell me you lost the fifty-five pencils.”

“Not *all* of them --”

“Oh my god--”

“And, in my defense, Cameron keeps the room messy as fuck --”

“Unbelievable --”

“Not to mention, you asked for some a few weeks ago to model a chemical formula --”

“I needed, like, five!”

“ *And* I still probably have, like, eighteen.”

“I’m telling Meeks you lost the pencils.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” They’re both laughing at this point, and this is exactly what Charlie missed. Misses.

They talk for a while more, moving from pencils to Calc to dinners at Welton, each word through the phone curling up like a cat in Charlie’s heart. Knox has to hang up first, because he’s supposed to be in his dorm for the allotted fifteen minutes before lights out.

Charlie walks back into the great room and most of his relatives are drunk, and his dad has his back turned to him, so Charlie strikes up a conversation with a particularly drunk aunt of his, makes sure to talk loudly enough that his dad sees, then makes his excuses and leaves, not without nicking a glass of wine.

In his room, Charlie wishes he had his saxophone, because he really feels like making a lot of noise, for no particular reason except that there’s a lot of things going on with his brain and a great way to deal with that is to release it via sax. He doesn’t have it, though, so he rereads the letter that may genuinely be his savior -- now that the novelty has worn off, he kind of thinks this Mary woman should probably chill out about his great-aunt -- she’s being a bit dramatic, not to mention verbose. Whatever. He settles for a nice scream into his pillow, then finishes the glass of wine, shoves the polaroid of him and Knox into his suitcase, and fishes out a newspaper Pitts had given him with a wink. Charlie’s still figuring out what article Pitts wants him to read when he falls asleep.

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The next two days are a boring blur of being polite around relatives, golfing, and sneaking in phone calls to his friends, but mostly to Knox, until they go to the hospital to say hello to the famous great-aunt Charlotte. Charlie doesn't know what he expected, when he sees her, weak, in her hospital bed. She just looks like a sick woman, though, Charlie thinks, it's not like there'd be a banner flying above her bed screaming ' *lesbian!'* Charlie and his parents just sort of sit, talking to each other, in her hospital room, until she wakes up, and then she joins into the stiff conversation.

Through the conversation, Charlie learns that she's actually incredibly dry, not very funny, and apparently she used to watch Charlie's dad when Charlie's grandmother was busy. It's insufferable, and the hospital room is too damn hot because Charlie's dad had made him wear a goddamn tweed coat.

Finally, his dad must think he's taking mercy on Charlie when he asks him if he wants to come with him to grab a drink of water, but Charlie sees it as an opportunity, so declines and sacrifices his mom to go with his dad. In the interest of politeness, probably, his mom gets up and follows his dad out of the room, and Charlie's alone with Charlotte.

"Um." He starts, shifting his weight so he's more relaxed. "So I actually wanted to ask you something." He thinks he sees her nod her head, it's kind of hard to be sure when she's supported mostly by pillows, so he continues. "I found this letter, on accident, when I came into your house, um, and sorry for reading it, but --" He fishes out the letter from the inside pocket of the tweed coat. He gives it to Charlotte, kind of placing it on her bed until her hand, shaking with age, picks it up and she examines it.

"Oh." She says.

"I wanted to ask you about it, because the thing is," He swallows. "I have this friend, and, um -- Well I guess the thing is that we aren't just friends, and I wasn't going to read the letter until I sort of accidentally

did, and it just reminded me of my friend and I, because this Mary, in this letter, she called you 'Dearest,' and my friend and I are.. Like that. So I wanted to ask you about it." Charlotte peers at Charlie, who's sitting up straighter than he thinks he's ever sat.

"So you're of the Oscar Wilde sort." She says.

"Um, yes." He says, once he gets what she means. He thanks God he's overheard Todd freaking out about The Picture of Dorian Gray . She keeps *looking at him,* and then she unfolds the letter a little more and runs her shaky fingers over the ink.

"I never married, you know." She says slowly. "Mary threw herself off a cliff, when I didn't go north."

"Oh my God." Charlie says.

"I suppose you think it's my fault." She says. Her eyes are clear, despite her age. "I did love her. I suppose if you were of the Oscar Wilde sort, I'm cut from Sapphic cloth. Or maybe not. It was always just her."

"Why didn't you go back?"

"My mother read the letters." Charlie is horrified to see tears brimming in the old woman's eyes, and feels sick when the implications of what she's said set in. "I didn't even get to go to her funeral." Charlotte says, and her voice trembles.

"I assume it's too much to ask if Father knew." He says.

“No. My sister, his mother, knew, but she hated me for it.” Charlie winces.

Then his parents come back, and Charlie feels like Atlas, holding up the entire goddamn sky for the rest of the visit. Eventually, his parents realize Charlotte’s more engrossed in the letter than in them, so they make their excuses and leave.

As he’s stepping out of the room, Charlie looks back, and Charlotte’s clutching the letter to her chest, and she mouths ‘thank you.’

Charlie feels a lump in his throat, and swallows it down.

&

Charlotte dies that evening. Her funeral is Sunday. Charlie doesn’t even think about returning to Welton until they pack up that night.

&

He’s silent in the car on the way to Welton, and, once there, decides he can skip class until lunch, so he sits on his bed and draws out that polaroid of him and Knox from his suitcase. After a while, he hears the doorknob turn. It’s probably Cameron, coming to pick up a textbook or whatever. “Forget your fuckin’ maths?” He asks, probably too rudely, but Cameron’s kind of the reason for this entire mess, so he doesn’t feel too bad about being mean to him.

“You know me,” Knox says, stepping in the door. “I don’t even turn in

maths.”

“One percent off your grade.” Charlie says, standing up and setting the polaroid on the desk beside him.

“Then let’s hope I’m okay with a 3% in Calc.” Knox says, holding open his arms. Charlie steps into them and wraps his arms tightly around Knox’s neck. Knox pulls him close and turns his face into the side of Charlie’s head. Charlie thinks he feels Knox press a kiss to his temple, and he’d missed it for five whole days, and it feels like coming home; it’s warm, and nice, and Knox is soft in all the right places, and he squeezes just tight enough. It feels so perfectly good that Charlie won’t be the first one to let go.

“Do you want to tell me about your plan?” Knox asks into Charlie’s hair, and that’s the last straw, so Charlie lets go of all the tears he had held in on Friday and on Sunday, and he lets himself be afraid for the future, and he thinks it's all the more cruel, that there’s no hope, after feeling so elated upon finding the letter.

And he’s suddenly so *angry* at Charlotte, because *what did she mean, the worst thing to be is safe?* Charlie would give anything to know he’d be okay.

But Knox doesn’t ask again, and that’s perfect, because Charlie’s pretty sure he knows, now.

&

After a while, Charlie calms down, and they both skip Latin. Charlie rubs his thumb over Knox’ knuckles like he ran his thumb over the corner of the polaroid as his head rests on Knox’ shoulder.

“No plan?” Knox asks, eventually, and Charlie shakes his head.

Eventually, it seems okay. They get to exchanging gentle kisses, and Charlie appreciates each one of them all the more for the fear they’ll get caught and die for them.

It’s a dark thought, probably better left unsaid.

As the bell rings for the next period, Knox leans his head back against the wall, and breathes. Charlie watches the rise and fall of his chest, and it hits him, slowly, then like a truck.

Despite it all, or maybe because of it, Charlie thinks he’s in love.

Chapter 3: I think it's you I'm meant to find

Chapter Summary

> The next three weeks get progressively more difficult as teachers assign more study guides and warn them — with increasing fervor — of the importance of passing their end-of-year senior exams. Charlie truly thinks he's alone in his disinterest. Even Knox has taken to spending evenings in the library, getting Neil to quiz him on chemical procedures. Charlie begins reviewing textbooks solely out of peer pressure, and he begins having to dodge Meeks at lunch and in breaks to escape from questions surrounding Charlie's use of his study schedule and his progress in Latin.
>
> Or, Charlie struggles with the 'secret' aspect of secret relationships, exam week is upon him and his friends, and he's started thinking seriously about California.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Wait, you're running away after you graduate?" Charlie hears Todd whisper-yell at Neil.

"Not — no, not running away, I just — look, can we do this somewhere else?" Neil mutters, glancing furtively around the courtyard. Charlie steps behind a pillar. Neil gently takes Todd by the shoulder and walks the two to an open classroom.

After a moment, Charlie follows, curiosity getting the best of him.

"— California, there's a lot more opportunities if I want to be an actor, and Todd, if you — well—"

"What?"

“Todd, what are your plans after high school?”

“I — er, I suppose I would go to college, and, um, well I figured we might go to the same school and room together, so —”

“Okay, don’t you see? That’s what I’m saying! In California, we wouldn’t have to pretend to just be roommates, I was reading in the LA Times, and the California Supreme Court made it illegal to fire someone if they’re… well, if they’re like us.”

“So, if they’re gay?”

“Yes.”

“So we wouldn’t have to — you could be an actor? And what about me?”

“You could go to Stanford and be an English major.” Charlie can hear the smile in Todd’s voice when he says, “I’d like that.”

Charlie stands riveted. How hasn’t he thought of that? Move to California… Granted, he doesn’t know much about California, and there’s still the issue of his father, but if he and Knox were in California, it’d be a bit hard for his father to traverse an entire country, and from miles and miles away… well, his dad wouldn’t necessarily have to know, would he?

Charlie straightens where he had been leaning his ear against the door at the sound of footsteps entering the courtyard.

“Oh, hey, Charlie!” Meeks shouts out, hefting his books in a greeting. Charlie quickly steps away from the door so as not to alert Neil and Todd that he was listening.

“Hey, Meeks! Where are you off to?”

“Heading to the library before Chem. You know exams are in six weeks? I was going to start coming up with a study plan.” Charlie groans.

“Don’t remind me.”

“Do you want me to make you a plan?” Charlie shrugs. His plan was mostly to wing it, but he didn’t want to tell Meeks that, after he had tutored him in Latin all year.

“Well, I’ll do it, but since I am, try to stick to it, please…” Meeks starts to talk about the detriments of procrastination, which, of course, Charlie already knows, but he’s grateful for the low commitment conversation. He keeps nodding and humming at the lulls, letting his mind rest, still, on the dream of California.

He had all but given up on his family’s acceptance. Hadn’t the letter from Mary to his great-aunt been proof enough? If Charlotte’s own mother sent her away after reading the letters… It seemed a sort of close-mindedness ran in the family. That would mean he’d have to hide that part of him, especially around the holidays, but he’s already pretty much doing just that, and it’ll be markedly easier across the country, and away from narcs like Cameron. Briefly, he considers just disappearing in order to avoid the inevitable family obligations, but he’s a trust fund baby, and at least for the first few years, he’s going to have to rely on his family’s funding for college and living expenses.

Eventually, the two make it to the large library doors, and Meeks shoos Charlie away as he tries to offer to help come up with his own study schedule.

“I’ll do it, I’ll have loads of time on Spring Holiday, anyway, you know all I do is hide in my room at home, and besides, Pitts and Todd also asked me to make one, and I’ve got it down to a science at this point…”

“SHHH,” The librarian hisses, rudely, in Meek’s direction.

“Right, okay —” The heavy door slams just as a harrowed-looking senior slips out with a stack of books.

“Anyway,” Charlie says to himself, then goes to bother someone else. As he walks across the courtyard, the door of the classroom Neil and Todd had ducked into opens, and the two walk out, grinning like idiots.

&

Spring Holidays pass way too fast, and Charlie is incredibly annoyed at the sudden seriousness that descends upon his friends.

“Okay, *Aviditatem materiae durioris oportet esse.* ” Meeks quizzes him from the floor.

“Enthusiasm is transported strongly.” Charlie says without hesitation, his feet up on Knox’s lap.

“Not at all.”

“Um, enthusiasm is a strong material?” Charlie says, after a moment of thinking.

“Closer— where are you getting *enthusiasm* ?”

“ *Aviditatem* ! Or— wait, isn’t that bloodthirsty?”

“No, what the fuck?” Meeks says, as Knox rubs Charlie’s ankle sympathetically, his nose in a Calculus book.

“Well, what is it?”

“ *Ambition!”*

“No it’s not! That’s *gloria* !”

“Oh my god.” Meeks says, rubbing his temple. Charlie rolls his eyes, and as he glances left, over the edge of the couch, he sees Pitts and Todd looking confused as Cameron tries to explain a graph. Charlie rolls his eyes, again, just at the moment Cameron looks up. His stupid, ill-proportioned face gets redder as he glares at Charlie.

“What, Dalton?” He spits at Charlie. Knox looks up and shoots Charlie a warning look. Charlie just sighs loudly and settles deeper into the couch cushions. Meeks coughs quietly and looks pointedly at the Latin book in his lap.

“What was the sentence, again?” Charlie asks, trying to focus for Meek’s sake.

“ *Aviditatem materiae durioris oportet esse.* ”

“Ambition material firm to be-er. Ambition to be, um, a firmer material?”

“Okay, kind of, it’s *Ambition should be made of sterner stuff* —”

“Yet Brutus says he was ambitious; and Brutus is an honorable man!” Quotes Neil, fervently jumping from his seat, right hand over his heart. Most of the group laughs, but the Sophomore Algebra teacher on supervision coughs loudly, so they pipe down, which annoys Charlie, because in normal circumstances, they’d all recognize the lack of authority in a Sophomore teacher and keep quoting (or misquoting,) Shakespeare. (With dramatic reenactment, of course.)

Knox must sense his annoyance, so he taps Charlie’s foot to get his attention, then says:

“Come with me to get water?” Charlie nods.

As soon as they leave the room, Knox checks the hallway to make sure they’re alone and grabs Charlie’s hand. Charlie smiles.

“You seemed like you were losing your mind in there.” Knox says. Charlie lets out a huff and squeezes Knox’s hand.

“A bit.”

“Stressed about exams?”

“Absolutely not!” Charlie says, and Knox laughs. “No, I’m serious! It’s just that everyone *else* is so stressed. It’s not fun.”

“Plus, Cameron.”

“Yeah, plus Cameron. He’s just insufferable, always.” Knox laughs, and he’s really cute when he laughs, so Charlie glances around the hallway, again, then presses a quick kiss to his lips.

“Dalton!” Knox says, but he’s smiling. “You seem to be caring less and less about him. I remember a few months ago you were depressed for like three weeks because he found you out.” Charlie just shrugs.

“First of all, that was before you — don’t get too excited, it was before Neil and Todd, too.”

“Right,” Knox says. “But you’ve gotta admit I was at *least* 90% of it.”

“Oh, shut the entire fuck up.”

“You love me,” Knox said dismissively. Charlie just shakes his head and shoves Knox, but he’s pulled back in by their joined hands.

The dinner bell rings, and when Knox suggests they go back to get their things, Charlie brushes him off and figure’s they’ll get it later. He also may or may not make an incredibly immature and lewd joke. He’s a teenager, he’s entitled to bad jokes.

Thus, they're the first at the dinner table, and spend the three minutes they have without their riot of friends passing around hot plates full of food and trying to sneak the gross things onto one another's plates.

"You two are like *children* , I swear." Todd says fondly as he sits down next to Knox. Neil surreptitiously trails a hand across Todd's shoulders as he takes a seat next to him, which Charlie doesn't miss. He also doesn't miss Todd's answering smile, because he's absolutely certain that he's given the same smile to Knox, which, speaking of—

"Oh, fuck off!" Charlie says batting away Knox's fork as he tries to spear a particularly well-seasoned potato from his plate. Knox just snorts and goes for a second, smaller potato, which he triumphantly wins. Charlie elbows him.

"Ahem. Seniors." Professor McAllister looms over the table. Charlie tries to suppress a smile at Knox's grimace.

"Right, yeah, sorry." Knox says, moving his fork to his own plate.

"What a douche," Charlie says, once McAllister retreats to the teachers table. Knox laughs.

"You know, he's kind of right. You probably should be setting a better example for the underclassmen." Cameron starts, pointing at them with a green bean on his fork. "Not to mention, it's not funny to make fun of teachers just because you're failing their classes."

"I don't know, I'd say it's pretty funny." Charlie says nonchalantly. Knox snorts, and Cameron glances between the two of them, turning a little purple.

"Well, I think it's embarrassing the entire senior class." He says, clearly waiting for Charlie to shrink and the rest of the group to come to his aid. When he's met with the indifferent faces and wary

amusement of the group, he huffs and focuses on fervently cutting the rest of his green beans. Charlie takes that opportunity to dump some corn on Knox's shepherd's pie, to Knox's indignation and Charlie's delight.

Charlie and Knox get up together when dinner is dismissed to walk back to the study hall to grab their homework.

" *You're embarrassing the senior class! Don't make fun of McAllister! I clean his shoes with my own spit!!"* Charlie mimics as they walk. Knox laughs uproariously and adds:

"Yeah, be a good role model by teaching kids that fun is dead!" Charlie shakes his head, laughing.

&

Later, when Charlie returns to his dorm, Cameron is sitting upright on his bed instead of off in the showers, like he usually is in the evenings.

"What do you want?" Asked Charlie, who usually appreciates the section of evening in which Cameron is in the bathroom, as Charlie himself showers in the morning.

"You and Knox have become close." Cameron says, twirling a pen around his fingers.

"What's it to you?" asks Charlie.

"I just wouldn't want you to get any … ideas. You know I can still call your dad, any time I feel like."

“Just because you don’t have a best friend doesn’t mean all of us must suffer that fate, Cameron.” Charlie says lightly. Cameron turns a little redder, which is always amusing.

“I wouldn’t get any ideas, is all I’m saying. You forget I’ve read your journal entries.”

“And I’m sure you’ll inform my father thoroughly with your hitherto unrevealed bravery.” Charlie says with a false sweetness. It’s not like he’s unafraid of the consequences, but he’s beginning to get extraordinarily fed up with Cameron’s holier-than-thou attitude, and he’s never been one to fall in line.

“I’d be careful saying stuff like that to me,” Cameron says warningly. Charlie nods noncommittally, then flops on his bead, draws out a book, and says,

“Uh huh. Smells like it’s about shower time, wouldn’t you say?” He begins rifling through the pages until he finds his spot, pretending to read and putting on a rather impressive show of disinterest. He smiles from behind the pages when Cameron stomps out of their dorm. Almost immediately after, Neil pokes his head in the door.

“What’s gotten into Cameron?” He says, picking at the paint on the doorframe.

“Dunno. Somewhat of a bee in his bonnet recently, no?” Neil laughs, then sits down at the foot of Charlie’s bed.

“It’s all rather exciting, don’t you think?” he asks after a moment, smiling in that uniquely eager Neil way.

“What is?” Asks Charlie, stupidly.

“You know,” Neil lowers his voice conspiratorially. “Dating someone here. At Welton.” Charlie can’t help but grin.

“Us four are like little secret agents, running around here.” He says with humor. “How are you and Todd?” he asks, just to see Neil’s face light up.

“Oh, we’re great. Todd’s incredible — it’s really just about making him comfortable, and then he’s really got this beautiful mind; I’ve read his poetry, and I told him I wouldn’t tell anyone but, Charlie, he’s really something — I bet he’s really going to make it, if he pursues poetry. He’s really got a gift — I know Mr. Keating compares him to Whitman all the time, but he really is, except, of course, more modern, and a little bit more free, when he’s really comfortable, and it’s really insightful work — oh, but I’m ranting.” Neil says bashfully. “Tell me about you and Knox.”

So Charlie tells him, though he’s noncommittal and polite at first, but the more he talks the more fervent and genuine he gets; he talks about the notes scribbled in each other’s textbooks, and the stupid jokes and insults that are really just saying *I care about you, and I want to make you laugh,* in a million different ways, and he tells him all about how Knox is just so earnest when he wants to be, and how Knox’s poetry is so much better when he’s the subject, and he tells Neil:

“I actually might love him.” And Neils face gets that much more excited, and he whispers back:

“I love Todd, too,” And then they’re both giggling like schoolgirls, which is embarrassing, somewhat, but it’s nice to have a friend like this, that he can talk about Knox *to* but who isn’t Knox, a friend who gets it. Charlie thinks he would feel a lot more alone at the school if

Neil and Todd weren't there.

"You know, Cameron's not so keen on me being gay," Charlie says, after a little bit of back-and-forth teasing.

"He knows?"

"He found some stupid writing I did before Knox and I were together."

"Oh, that's awful. I noticed you were really not yourself for a few weeks, around the winter, but I didn't know… Does he still have them?" Charlie shrugs.

"I don't know, but he keeps threatening to call my dad and tell him, with proof, so I'd assume he does. He doesn't like that I've started caring less." Neil looks horrified. Charlie understands why: if Neil's dad ever found out he was dating Todd, Charlie's pretty sure he'd have a lot more to worry about then being simply disinherited.

"Well, let's find them." Neil says. Charlie looks at him like he's mad.

"What?"

"Cameron's not here right now, is he? I mean the writing has got to be in here somewhere. We can just lock the door and you can say that you're changing." Charlie can't believe he's never thought of this before. He's a little embarrassed, too. He calls *himself* the troublemaker, when clearly Neil has a lot more nerve than him.

“Alright,” Charlie says, getting up and putting his abandoned book back on his nightstand. He goes up to lock the closed door as Neil begins poking around Cameron’s things.

Charlie thinks, if he wasn’t so paranoid Cameron would come knocking at the door, that he’d be having the time of his life. He has to stop himself from making fun of Cameron’s things with nearly every drawer he looks in — while quickly rooting in his wardrobe, for example, Charlie has to stop himself from audibly laughing at the incredibly over-the-top monogramming on even Cameron’s undershirts.

In the end, it’s Neil who finds the writing in between Cameron’s desk and the wall, and they’re both thankful the endeavor hadn’t taken more than five minutes. Neil obviously tries to protect Charlie’s privacy (ironic, really, considering the measures the two took to retrieve the papers,) by just quietly saying,

“Oh, Dalton, I think this is your handwriting,” and making an obvious point not to read the entries as he hands them over. Then, Charlie quietly pads over to the door and surreptitiously slides the lock open, so as not to make a sound. He thanks Neil profusely, then Neil goes quickly back to his dorm, throwing Charlie a mischievous wink as he leaves.

Charlie flips through the pages, cringing at his writing, (the amount of improvement he’s made over something like six months is remarkable, especially considering his effort to always answer wrong in class,) but nevertheless grateful to remove ammunition from Cameron.

It seems, with time and thwarted plans, Cameron has shrunk from a formidable threat to a simple, bigoted classmate who Charlie hates. It’s strange to remember not long ago, Cameron had stolen all of Charlie’s bravado with the theft of his journaling.

As he sifts through the pages, Charlie remembers his great-aunt. He supposes a great deal of his newfound courage is from her; after all, he didn't want to spend his entire life loveless and upset because he didn't, say, move to California with Knox and chase what he wanted.

Carpe Diam, he thinks, smiling, then — *Diem? Diom? Definitely not Diom. I'm gonna fail Lati — Whatever.* He's really not looking forward to exams. Then, Cameron returns, hair a darker red with water, and Charlie shoves the papers out of sight and scrambles for something to occupy his hands.

"Since when do you garden?" Cameron asks, peering at the book in Charlie's hands. Charlie resists the impulse to check the cover of the book, and just shrugs.

The next three weeks get progressively more difficult as teachers assign more study guides and warn them — with increasing fervor — of the importance of passing their end-of-year senior exams. Charlie truly thinks he's alone in his disinterest. Even Knox has taken to spending evenings in the library, getting Neil to quiz him on chemical procedures. Charlie begins reviewing textbooks solely out of peer pressure, and he begins having to dodge Meeks at lunch and in breaks to escape from questions surrounding Charlie's use of his study schedule and his progress in Latin. It's especially annoying sitting next to Pitts in English, who has an obnoxious habit of practicing timed essay-writing by scribbling out essays on completely made-up topics in the middle of class. Even Mr. Keating, who is a notoriously chill teacher, starts piling the students with extra-credit opportunities and homework essays, and before long, Charlie finds himself confined to the library during study hall as well, just trying to stay on top of his homework.

On the fourth and final week before exams, teachers stop assigning homework in favor of yearly review in class, but that doesn't lighten the workload in the slightest. What makes it worse is the influx of bugs who have decided to take up residence inside classrooms, and by Friday, Charlie's arms are littered with bug bites. Sleeping becomes difficult with the stress of exams and the incessant itching that the bug

bites prompt.

The weekend before exams are supposed to start, the previously quiet Spaz starts loudly sharing his study schedule with whoever will listen, ("Of course, I could only fit in six hours of studying on Friday, because I slept in before breakfast — you know, sleep is really important for good scores — but I'm averaging about eight hours daily, and I expect that'll only increase during the weekend—") and the Dead Poets Society is pretty much chained to the library desks. As a result, they witness Mark Tunyman, a Junior, have a full on meltdown that stops abruptly when his bulky alarm watch beeps, and a senior by the name of Bill O'Mackey rip out several pages from a textbook and start filling them out fervently. Charlie, who spends most of his time making paper airplanes out of study material and writing on Knox's papers, even learns a smidge more Latin as the weekend progresses, and by Sunday night, most students have purple shadows under their eyes and a bleary look to them.

Charlie is grateful when exam week begins. They have two exams per day, afternoons off classes, and they're supposed to be done by Wednesday. On Monday, Knox shakes Charlie awake at three-thirty in the morning, whispering, "Me, Meeks, and Todd are going to study in my room before breakfast. Do you want to come?"

"Wha'about O'Mackey?" Charlie asks groggily, referring to Knox's roommate.

"He sleeps like a rock. He won't notice, especially if we're quiet."

"Spaz'zaid sleep's imp'rtant f'r good scores," Charlie says, turning over and shoving his face into his pillow. Knox shrugs, kisses Charlie quietly on his shoulder, and leaves the room.

When he actually has to wake up, the stress from exams finally hits,

and Charlie's studying just as hard as any of his friends at breakfast. There's a knot in his stomach as they line up for their first exam — history — then he sits at his seat, turns over his paper when the bell rings …

Use the Documents below to support your thesis.

How did Coolidge's view of laissez-faire economics affect his popularity among the middle class…

Fuck. Charlie thinks, then begins writing…

He frequently gets distracted, staring at Knox's head two rows to the left and one to the front, and imagines them, in California, perhaps enjoying a milkshake near the beach…

When he turns in his paper, he only has a page and three-fourths written, but he's written a conclusion and enough paragraphs to use all but one of the provided documents as evidence. As they stream out of the classroom, students begin talking about the test.

"What prompt did you get?"

"Coolidge was the twenty-sixth president, right?"

"Nah, that was Teddy Roosevelt—"

"Do you think it was okay that I talked about environmentalism in the '20s instead of Harding's scandals? I just thought —"

"I definitely failed —"

Spaz annoys everyone by asking, “Do you guys think four pages was enough? I used all the documents three times each, but I’m afraid he expects at *least* five pages, and I wanted to include Hoover’s background as an engineer—” until Todd uncharacteristically says,

“Spaz, for once, could you *not?* ” and Neil beams with pride.

“I swear,” mutters Knox into Charlie’s ear, “Spaz has to make us all go through the test after we finish — as if doing it once wasn’t enough.” Charlie snorts.

Next is chemistry, which Charlie is rather unconfident in, though he feels better when he talks to Pitts, who somehow mixed up mols and grams, ran out of time, and wrote that 14.7 grams of sodium required seven thousand liters of chlorine to make Sodium Chloride.

They don’t relax that night — studying for English and Latin — and by the time Charlie goes to bed, all he can do is pray that he won’t mix up the Vocative and Locative case tomorrow.

Charlie’s english essay could have gone a lot worse — he had to analyze *Give Me the Splendid, Silent Sun,* which is a poem Charlie’s pretty familiar with, but he runs out of time to write a conclusion. Latin, of course, is a bona fide disaster, going badly even by Charlie’s low standards. Charlie’s certain he’s completely mistranslated the lines he was given. (He definitely didn’t remember the Aeneid containing sentient, bloodthirsty hills, but he did the best he could.)

“Glad it’s over,” Charlie says, when Meeks asks him how it went.

The Calculus test on Wednesday is eventful. It ends up fine, Charlie’s

confident he at least passed, but Bill O'Mackey can't say the same. Apparently he had tried to cheat by bringing in notes he had taken on vandalized pages of textbook, and pencils stopped for a full ten minutes as all the students watched him vehemently deny cheating, shoving the ripped-out textbook pages under his exam paper. The teacher simply lifts O'Mackey's paper, and as he's walked out of the exam, O'Mackey resorts to shouting insults at their teacher. It's all rather exciting.

"I can't believe I room with that guy!" Knox exclaims, once they leave.

Charlie's perfectly confident he aced P.E. — he takes the leading position in rowing, and his team wins in the race they have as a final.

"Freedom!" Neil says, strolling out on the field behind the school, the rest of the Society in tow. He's met with cheers and whoops, and they spend the rest of Wednesday lounging by the lake. The breeze is cool, as is the lake water, and when a few of their paler friends leave to seek refuge from the sun under the arches in the outdoor hallway, Mr. Keating crosses the lawn to steal Neil and Todd to talk about their exams. By the twinkle in his eye, Charlie can tell that it'll be high praise, though Neil's apprehensive expression and Todd's outright panic make it clear they expect the opposite.

So by around three or four in the afternoon, it's just Charlie and Knox, under a tree by the edge of the lake. As Cameron's inside, Charlie leans against Knox's legs, gazing at passing clouds and making up obnoxious stories for the shapes he sees in them. Knox reads a newspaper with one hand in Charlie's hair, and it's all so heart-wrenchingly perfect that Charlie almost forgets about Cameron.

"Dalton," Knox says.

"Hm?" Charlie says lazily.

“Look at this — rioters in California last month.”

“Read it to me.”

“ *Backlash from the Cooper Donut Riot has started a nationwide conversation about gay rights — though not many want to hear it. California, home to the Cooper Donut Riot, is notoriously soft on homosexuals, though evidence from recent polls in San Francisco show that alienating homosexuals — as was the trend in Washington this year — may be a mistake. Making up possibly over ten percent of the population, gays* — hang on, this isn’t relevant… — *California is famously lax on the gay population. The California Supreme Court ruled eight years ago, and affirmed this year, that a congregation of homosexuals does not warrant the closing of a bar, (see ‘gay bar,’ pg. 38) and set precedent for homosexuals to legally gather, so long as sexuality is not expressed physically…”* Charlie stays quiet. “Well?” asks Knox.

Carpe Diem, thinks Charlie, as he turns to face Knox.

“Neil and Todd are moving to California after they graduate,” Charlie says, looking at Knox’s earnest brown eyes. Knox searches Charlie’s face.

“What are you saying?” He asks, the beginning of a smile on his face.

“Are you going to run away with me to California after we graduate?” asks Charlie, starting to grin as well. Knox throws his head back and shouts out a laugh. Charlie’s crooked grin gets more mischievous. “Well?” Asks Charlie, echoing Knox, but mostly just being a little shit. Knox reaches for Charlie and folds him into his arms.

“I love you,” Knox says into Charlie’s hair. “And yes. Yes, yes, yes. Let’s run away to California.” Charlie’s grin turns into a full-blown smile, which he hides in Knox’s collarbone, and his heart feels so full it’s hard to breathe, then he suddenly remembers something.

“I have something for you.” Charlie says, extracting himself from Knox’s arms, and reaching for his bag. He rifles around a bit, shoving aside hastily-stuffed papers until he finds the folder he was looking for.

He watches Knox as he reverently opens the folder and handles each page of Charlie’s six-month-old writing like it’s the most precious thing he’s ever been given.

“What’s this?” Knox says, quietly curious.

“I stole it from Cameron.”

“It’s your handwriting.”

“I stole it *back* from Cameron.” Charlie says. Knox looks up at him.

“These are — Cameron doesn’t have proof anymore!” Knox says, realizing, and smiling brilliantly.

“Yeah,” Charlie says, climbing between Knox’s legs again. Knox leans back to keep looking at Charlie’s face, beaming.

“You’re giving them to me?” He asks. Charlie rolls his eyes.

“Duh. They’re about you.” But the harshness of his words are kind of negated by Charlie’s hands now on Knox’s face, and Charlie pulls him a little closer, until their foreheads meet. Knox brings his hands up to cup Charlie’s face as well, and Charlie looks Knox directly in the eyes and says, “I love you,” then they’re kissing.

It’s the first time they’ve told each other those words, and in between each small kiss they give and receive, both of them say it, again and again, into the air that they share. It’s only three words, but with each cantation, Charlie means *I would die to love you,* and *I think it’s you I’m meant to find,* and *I’d choose you, find you anywhere.*

&

Violent delights have violent ends, Charlie thinks, as he returns with Knox on campus, because they freeze before walking into the foyer of the staircase, upon hearing Cameron’s voice.

“Hello Mr. Dalton? Yes, this is Richard Cameron — I’m calling on account of your son—”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Thank you so much for reading! Yes, it's a longer chapter this time, and I'm also shocked at how quick it was up. Again, you can thank peer pressure for that

Make sure to kudos and let me know how you felt about it! Leave a comment! It'll make me write faster ;)

Chapter 4: land of opportunity

Chapter Summary

> “So, the point is: our dear friend Mr. Nolan may have recently discovered Knox and me.” Charlie says grimly. Keating winces. “And he’s probably going to tell my dad, and I’ve got a dead aunt who’s the same way, and — my point is, with the aunt, that historically, my family doesn’t do well with that. Especially my dad. So —”
>
> Charlie faces the consequences for his actions. Knox comes up with a plan.

Chapter Notes

> okay do i know exactly how college applications worked in the late 1950s? not really. creative liberty.
>
> i hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie simply cannot be held responsible for his actions. He hardly even remembers what happened.

Fucking Cameron had been on the phone with his father, and what came next was a series of impulses and actions.

First, Charlie dropped Knox’s hand.

Then, he remembers winding his hand back — he doesn’t really remember the impact, but vividly, he can hear his father’s tinny “ *What — young man!* ” through the phone, and Cameron’s howl as he fell to the floor. Charlie would be lying if he said it wasn’t satisfying.

That's about when the panic set in — Charlie remembers thinking, *wow, real great job with that one, wonder when your brain was replaced with a rock*— frantically shoving the phone back on the hook, and Knox's face: slightly bemused surprise.

"Fuck." Charlie had said, turning to Knox.

"Language, Mr. Dalton."

And Charlie had turned around to look McAllister directly in the face.

So that's why Charlie's now in Gale Nolan's office. Nolan's looking at him, drawing a finger lazily around the wooden paddle. Charlie internally cringes at the implications — he's been victim to it several times by now, and it's never an experience he's keen to repeat.

Nolan spends some time waxing poetic about the pillars of Welton, and how absolutely abhorrent disrespectful of said pillars Charlie's conduct was.

"I'm afraid your disregard for our values warrants a talk with your father." Nolan says, sneering. Charlie suddenly feels cold. "Friday, at five p-m, I expect you at my office. He and I will be waiting." Nolan takes his hand away from the paddle.

Charlie doesn't like where the conversation is going. Though he sits politely in his chair, his mind begins to race: he had expected, (and dreaded,) to be met with the paddle upon entering Nolan's office. It's what he had known; what he had faced before. But speaking to his father… Charlie's dad doesn't know the amount of times he's gotten a talking-to and correctional discipline in this room — one blessing of the corporal punishment is that it keeps his missteps private from his parents.

“I hope you understand the *severity* of your misstep, Mr. Dalton.” Charlie seems to recall an entire fistfight between two juniors during his sophomore year at Welton, and they both were — though bruised — back at school within two days of the incident. So Nolan’s probably not just talking about the punch, and that thought — well, it’s not pleasant, especially since Charlie’s got some secrets he’d really like to keep to himself.

“We have every right to report this behavior to any college you should wish to attend.” Disturbingly, Nolan bears further down on Charlie, who dearly hopes Nolan just hates him especially. He’s got a lot more to lose than Nolan’s good opinion. “You would do well to remember, this is a *private school.* We will be discussing options with your father to determine an… appropriate punishment, for such heinous behavior. And Dalton — it would do you well to address those… rumors… which surround you at our next meeting. Think carefully about where you step from here.”

Charlie coughs. “What?”

“You are dismissed.”

“What rumors?”

“Young man, I believe I said you were dismissed.”

“But —”

“Dismissed.” Nolans voice is cold, and he begins tracing the wood grains on the paddle again. Charlie’s head swims with questions, but he’s — well, he’s overconfident, but not quite enough to risk the paddle, even when Nolan’s implications are worse than any physical pain.

“Right.” Charlie says, then rises from his seat. “Um, good evening, sir.” Nolan looks disdainfully at Charlie.

Charlie doesn’t think he’s ever gotten the fuck out of Nolan’s office as fast as he does (though, most times he leaves Nolan’s office, he’s in too much pain to really haul ass like he’d like,) and once he turns the corner, he sprints to his dorm.

While barreling down the three stairs into the dorm hallway, he decides to save himself from Cameron and reroute, streaming past the hallway entirely to make it outside.

When his breath comes short in his lungs and he’s got an impressive stitch in his side, Charlie stops, having made it to the back gardens at Welton. He looks around, and ends up lying on the lawn a few paces from the lake. He breathes for a few minutes, lying on the lawn, and then thinks about how he’s been breathing for a few minutes, lying on the lawn, then absently notes the grey, sweating summer sky. Goddamn Vermont. The stitch in his side rattles a little every time he breathes.

After a time, after the sky darkens some, and the shadows grow hazy and long, Charlie feels someone sit — lie — next to him.

“You look great.” Someone — Knox — says. Charlie peeks his eye open to see him looking at him from the corner of his eye.

“Hello, dear.” Charlie says, aiming for nonchalant and probably missing by miles.

“Dear?”

“I dunno.”

“Did Nolan…” Knox asks after a beat.

“No.”

“So you’re okay?”

“Yes. No. I dunno.” Knox doesn’t say anything to that, and, although Charlie knows him better than anyone, although Charlie probably loves him more than he’s ever loved anyone, ever will love anyone, he feels embarrassed for answering like that.

“So what’d he say?” A bird chirped somewhere above them.

“Well, I’ll be having a conversation with my father.” Charlie says, looking anywhere but Knox.

“Doesn’t everyone has to have a conversation with their parents when they hit someone on campus?”

“No. And our chat probably won’t be just about my excellent right hook.”

“Charlie.” Knox says. Charlie doesn’t look at him. “Oh, honey —”

“Stop.”

“Charlie —”

“Don’t you get it?” Charlie says, sitting up. “We *just* finished exams, and I still may not be able to graduate! They may kick me out! Like, why the fuck did I even study?”

“They may — what? Why? I mean in sophomore year —”

Charlie snorts. “Why? That’s funny Knox, you’re typically not very dense.”

“What?”

“Knox, it’s because of us! Don’t you *get it?* They *know* about it, Knox, they *know,* and they’re going to — to kick me out, or — or worse, call the police, and we won’t *ever* have a future, because —”

“Wait, back up: they know about us?”

“They sure implied that they did, and unless I have any other incriminating secrets I forgot about—”

“Do you?”

“Knox.”

“Right. Um. So they probably know about us and also we might not be able to graduate. Great.” Knox is silent for a beat, then turns a little bit more to face Charlie. Charlie looks away from him. Knox reaches out to take Charlie’s hand, and Charlie hesitates for a little bit, then lets him.

“Sorry for snapping at you.” Charlie says, after a moment.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s not your fault. That they know."

“It’s not your fault either.” A beat. Then, “Do they know about Todd and Neil?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“I think we should probably warn them.”

“Yeah.” Another beat. Then Knox says, “Do you think we should tell Meeks and Pitts?”

“I mean — yeah. Okay.”

“Okay,” says Knox, then brings Charlie’s hand up to his lips.

“Sap.”

“You love it.”

“Unfortunately.” At that, Knox snorts, and drags Charlie into his lap and hugs him. Charlie kind of can’t shake the fear that someone’s watching, so he detangles himself after a short moment. Knox looks at him oddly, so Charlie shrugs.

“Don’t want to make it worse.” Charlie says gruffly, then stands up and offers Knox and hand. Knox takes it and stands.

“Wait,” says Knox. Charlie moves to walk towards the school, but Knox stays still, stopping Charlie with the hand he still holds. Charlie turns to face him. “Are you — do you want to talk, a bit, about what to do for when we’re at school?”

“When are we not at school?” Charlie mutters. Knox kicks him, takes Charlie’s shoulders and turns them towards him so Charlie’s forced to face him.

“Look, Dalton, I get that you’re worried and I am too, but I’m still in a relationship with you, and I don’t — I dunno, man, if you’re going to be pissy whenever I try to let you know I care about you — like that’s not gonna work for me. So I’d like it if we’re on the same page.”

“I don’t — I mean of course I still want to be with you, I’m not —”

“Okay, just making sure, because you kind of aren’t acting like it —”

“Hey!”

“So, I think maybe boundaries for school is a good idea. So we’re on the same page. And drop the attitude.”

“I don’t have an attitude.” Charlie says, under his breath.

“Case and point.”

“Goddamn, okay, fine. Boundaries.” Charlie says. He feels himself grin a little in spite of himself. Knox grins too, probably because Charlie’s grinning, then says:

“Do you — I mean, can I help? Like do you want a hug? ‘Cause I tried that, and —”

“No. No, it’s okay. You’re good. You’re here, so…”

“Yeah.” There’s a moment.

“Damnit, Knox,” Charlie says, then hugs him. Charlie feels Knox sort of soften under him, moving so they’re both comfortable. After a moment, where Charlie contemplates how the hell Knox can make him laugh even when he’s in the most rotten of moods possible, Charlie decides to slap Knox’s back a few times, for one, to make Knox laugh, (it works,) and two, to, he doesn’t know, no-homo the hug for any potential phantom bystanders. It makes him feel guilty to care about that.

&

Okay, so there's only one day until Friday, not counting that Wednesday evening, Charlie thinks, when Knox and him walk back to their dorms. When they make it back to the building, they join the throng of students moving towards the dining hall for dinner.

"I hear we're doing pineapple-glazed ham tonight, 'cause we're done with exams," someone says, and Charlie and Knox exchange a look of exaggerated, sarcastic surprise. They sort of shove their way to their table, where Neil, Todd, Meeks, and Cameron, who's sporting an impressive black eye, are already sitting. Charlie takes the seat furthest from Cameron, but there's not another seat at that end of the table, near their group, so Knox vaults across the table (" *ABSOLUTELY UNACCEPTABLE, OVERSTREET!"*) to a chorus of cheers, and takes a seat across from Charlie and one seat to the left, next to Todd. Charlie and Knox exchange another look as it is revealed that their dinner is, indeed, pineapple-glazed ham.

Pitts shows up five minutes into the meal, his face creased from what looks like a pillow.

"You napped?" Meeks asks.

"Yeah, you all went back to play cards and I suck at poker." There's an uproar of laughter from the group.

"Me and you both, Pitts." Knox says, over the din, then gestures to the seat next to Todd, across from Cameron.

"We didn't play cards for very long." says Meeks, beginning to fork a slice of ham and some pimentos onto his plate. "Cameron got up and fuckin' left after he lost his watch —"

Neil proudly flashes his wrist, where Cameron's cheap Timex glints.

“— so he got up to properly sulk in his room.” Todd snorts, as does Pitts. Charlie’s very well aware that Cameron indeed did *not* go to his room, and instead phoned his father, and is briefly annoyed that the tipping point for his own doom was something so asinine as a poker game over an old Timex.

“Didn’t sulk.” Cameron puffs out his chest importantly, but the effect is sort of tempered by the black eye. Knox rolls his eyes, and Neil turns his wrist with a flourish and dramatically gestures towards the green beans near Charlie, (Charlie obliges, and passes.) Cameron makes a show of definitely-not-eyeing-his-Timex.

“Anyway, after that, Todd had the brilliant idea of *discussing test answers* ,” Neil picks up, then spoons said green beans onto his plate.

“Ugh.” says Knox, then shoves Todd amicably. Todd sputters in indignation.

“ *You* asked *me* about that Harding passage!”

“Yeah, you’re right, and that question still makes no fucking sense.” Neil concedes.

The group laughs, and quickly they break into smaller conversations in threes and twos — the better to hear each other through the echoes talk and laughter in the dining room. It was a stark contrast to the atmosphere just the previous day — quiet and studious — and Charlie was *in his element* — aside from the looming threat of the coming Friday.

“No — and then I see Spaz with one foot in the sink —” Pitts is saying.

“You’re lying.” says Todd.

“I’m dead serious, I swear it on my life — so he’s got O’Mackey’s toothbrush in his right hand and Neil’s shirt in his left—”

“Oy,” comes a voice from behind Charlie, who definitely doesn’t jump.

“Hey.” says the voice. Charlie turns around to see Knox looming behind him.

“Oh, I didn’t notice you’d gotten up.”

“Shame on you.”

“Ha-ha. What’s up?”

“I think we should talk to Neil and Todd today.”

“Today? We have, like, all of Thursday.”

“True, but … well, I had an idea, and I’m thinking if we could get everyone we’re going to tell — Neil, Todd, Meeks and Pitts, maybe, and go over to Keating’s… I don’t know. But I have a sort of a plan, so, yes. Tonight.”

“Mind telling me?”

“It’s the middle of dinner.”

“And you started the conversation.”

“Yeah, because I wanted to tell — doesn’t matter. Get Neil and Meeks, I’ve got Pitts and Todd.”

“Roger that.” Charlie says, then watches as Knox picks his way back to his seat.

It’s not a while before dinner ends — the high energy making the allotted hour seem shorter. As people begin streaming out of the hall, Charlie nicks Meeks and Neil (“Gotta speak with you two real quick,”) and drags them, alongside Knox with Todd and Pitts, to Keating’s office.

Neil moves to knock on the door, but Knox stops him with a hand on his wrist.

“I’ve got an idea, and it involves running away. Kind of. And you all are my best friends so. I thought-” He glances at Charlie, who nods. “-Well, we thought it’d be fun to all go together. To California. We all hate it here, so. I mean — anyway, if you’re interested, I’ve got a plan for, like, graduating, if we aren’t here.”

Meeks and Pitts exchange a look, and Charlie sees Neil surreptitiously squeeze Todd’s elbow. Neil raises his hand to knock again, and Knox nods.

Keating, when he answers, welcomes them graciously.

“No Cameron?” He asks. The six of them look at one another.

“Nope,” says Charlie, who proceeds to saunter into the room and throw off his blazer. Keating smiles vaguely and gestures for the remaining boys to enter. Neil and Todd unsurprisingly take the seats closest to Keating and each other, and Meeks and Pitts decide to prove that they can absolutely cohabit the same chair, despite Pitts’ impressive height. Charlie leans on Keating’s desk, and Knox remains standing.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Keating asks, after offering everyone an espresso.

“Good question.” Pitts says.

“Uh,” Knox begins eloquently. “Right. Actually, do you have tea?” Keating obligingly pours Knox some tea, and Knox takes a sip before starting. “You know Sonnet 20?”

“‘ *A woman’s face with Nature’s hand own painted / Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;’”* Keating quotes wistfully. “Of course I know it.”

Knox looks at Charlie, and gestures towards Keating with a glance. Charlie gets it, and shrugs, nodding. Charlie notices Keating watching their exchange indulgently. “A lot of people think Shakespeare wasn’t talking about a woman, in that sonnet.” Knox says. Keating nods, and Neil glances at Todd, who’s looking at Knox. “And, I wanted to preface what I’m about to say, to you, and to you, Pitts and Meeks, with, kind of an acknowledgement that — er. Should I write a sonnet, it’d — well. It’d be like that one. In subject. It’d be to — uh.”

“Me. It’d be to me.” Charlie says. “And vice versa.”

“Nifty.” says Meeks, who doesn’t look all that shaken. Pitts nods and shrugs. “Hell yeah.”

“So, the point is: our dear friend Mr. Nolan may have recently discovered that.” Charlie says grimly. Keating winces. “And he’s probably going to tell my dad, and I’ve got a dead aunt who’s the same way, and — my point is, with the aunt, that historically, my family doesn’t do well with that. Especially my dad. So —”

“Well, you know, earlier today, he decked Cameron ‘cause Cameron was calling his dad and about to —” begins Knox.

“Yeah, that’s true, I did do that —”

“Is that why he’s got a black eye? He wouldn’t say,” says Neil thoughtfully.

“Back up,” says Meeks. “You what?”

“Yeah, I was in Nolan’s office earlier, that’s how I found out he knows about Knox and I —”

“Knox and *me* , in that context, Dalton.” Keating says.

“ — Yeah, Knox and me — well, what happened was Knox and I were hanging out outside after the exams, and then after a while we decided to go back, and we kind of walked into the foyer, and, like,

great timing, because Cameron's just on the phone with my *dad* , and like all semester he's been threatening to call my dad 'cause've Knox and me, and I don't even know what happened, I just decked him.

"Anyway, McAllister decides that'd be a great moment to show up, and so I get sent to Nolan, and then Nolan starts making all these vague threats about how I'd have a lot to answer for this Friday, when my fuckin' — oops, sorry, sir — when my dad shows, so I asked him what he was talking about and he kind of didn't say anything, so I booked it." Charlie finishes.

"Okay, so that's not great." says Meeks, who's still sort of falling out of the chair he's sharing with Pitts.

"So we were like, what if we ran away?" says Knox. "At least for us, we were looking into it a bit, and in California, there's some laws about how you can't discriminate against someone, in a job, if they're like us. So here's my plan:"

Knox starts explaining: thinking they'd leave after school technically ends on Friday, (graduation wouldn't happen until the two weeks after summer started, on account of the time for test grading and grade calculations,) Knox meant to get an informal report on grades and accolades for each of them, send Keating a California address, and have their formal papers mailed when they were ready.

"Well, yes. That's possible," says Keating pensively. "I had somewhat looked forward to seeing you all off at graduation, but… on account of the circumstances, I recognize the urgency of the situation."

"I mean I *would* go to graduation, and I know I can't force anyone to ditch it, but I don't really see another choice but to ditch, for me at least." Charlie says, looking at his friends.

“I suppose you’re right.” says Keating.

“It’s funny you suggest we move — Todd and I — I’m sure you all know this, or, if you don’t Todd and I are also together; but Todd and I were thinking of moving as well, though, we were going to wait until after graduation.” Neil says, nudging Todd’s foot with his own.

“You could still do that. I mean, no one *has* to come with us, of course.” Knox says, again.

“I got into Stanford.” Todd says, after a beat. “So as long as I get my diploma, at some point, I don’t really see a point in going to graduation. I doubt my parents will show anyway.” Charlie looks at Knox, who looks at Neil, who’s beaming.

“You didn’t tell me you got accepted into Stanford!” he says, looking as though he would very much like to jump out of his seat and give Todd a hug. Todd looks at him with an embarrassed sort of smile, and his face gradually gets redder.

“I only just found the letter before dinner.”

“ *Todd!”*

“When did you apply?” asks Meeks.

“I put my application together before spring break. I’m pretty sure the application deadline is rather late — in early July, I believe, so —”

“ — well, only — pardon, Todd, but I was reading in the paper about Stanford’s engineering plans, and they’re pretty good. I thought it was a stretch, being so far away, but I’d like to go.” Meeks says excitedly. Pitts perks up.

“What?” he asks.

“Yeah, there’s some talk about the *SLAC National Accelerator Library*: really interesting stuff—”

“Why didn’t you give me the paper?”

“I dunno, you wanted to go to MIT,”

“ *Not if you didn't—”*

“Anyway,” says Todd, interrupting Pitts, “I could help anyone who wanted to apply. It wasn’t too hard.”

Mr. Keating looks at the group of six boys. “I can get you your papers. I only wish — ah, I did want to see you six graduate. I wonder if…” Charlie, who had been taking a minute to consider whether or not he truly did want to go to Stanford — he knew he didn’t want to be a lawyer or a businessperson — pauses at Keating’s tone.

“What?” He asks, straightening.

“Ah, I don’t know if I’m supposed to do this … only,” he sighs. “I wouldn’t want to rob you six of your graduation. I have an old family home, in Montpelier — two bedrooms, and it’s close enough to the highway. I could offer you that home, for a little, at least until those of you who want to go to graduation can. It may help to amass some money before making a move across the country, as well, and you wouldn’t have to pay the rent.”

“Are you serious?” asks Neil eagerly.

“Very much.” says Keating indulgently. Charlie privately thinks that offer sweetens the pot considerably — while Pitts and Meeks looked somewhat skeptical of picking up and moving right before they’d technically graduated, the offer to stay until they’d normally be able to move made the prospect seem less dangerous.

The group of seven didn’t speak for a moment, Knox sipping his tea, and the others thinking. Some sort of balloon seemed to swell in Charlie’s chest as he considered the emerging plan.

Some time later, it was decided that on Friday, when much of the student body would be returning home for the two weeks before graduation, Neil and Charlie would go with Mr. Keating to his family home — leaving as soon as classes technically ended, to avoid the meeting with Charlie’s father. As Charlie would turn eighteen a week and a half after that Friday, and hopefully, his father wouldn’t completely disinherit him before that, he could collect as much money as possible from his trust fund and transfer it into his own account. Neil would leave a note to his father.

Knox, Todd, Meeks, and Pitts would go home until graduation, visiting the home occasionally and working on Stanford applications if they planned to apply. After graduation, all six would move into the home, get jobs in Vermont, and save up, (or transfer funds) until they had enough to make rent and tuition, for those who got into Stanford.

“Land of opportunity, am I right?” Charlie asks Knox, on Thursday when they began to pack.

“What are you going to do in California?” Knox asks, after playfully shoving Charlie. Charlie thinks.

“I don’t know. That’s really not that important.”

“It’s not?”

“No.”

“But that’s why we’re going. So we can have a stable future.”

“Yeah. I suppose that’s less about where the stability comes from, for me, and more just… living. With you and our friends.” Charlie says, looking at the shirt he’s folding. He doesn’t notice Knox’s grin, but he hears it in his voice when he says “Sap.”

“You love it,” says Charlie.

“Unfortunately,” says Knox, abandoning his folding to turn Charlie to face him. When they hug, Charlie’s still, irrationally, a little nervous that Cameron would bust into the room, but he finally lets himself relax into the hug.

It’s a somewhat wild plan, but he’s a somewhat wild person, with a

somewhat wild love.

Chapter End Notes

if you liked it, please leave a comment! i promise it helps me write faster ;). I appreciate each comment and kudos.

hope you enjoyed, and have a good day!

Chapter 5: montpelier, vermont

Chapter Summary

Friday does not go as planned, at all.

How a footrace leads to reckless driving, roadside diners, and fireflies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday does not go as planned, at all. After class, Charlie and Neil were supposed to meet Keating in his office, helpfully disguised by their reputations as favorite students of Keatings, and by the inevitable throngs of students in the hallways. Charlie had taken extra care to pack up early in every class, and he wasn't the only one — some students, who had lost their jackets for the bright June day and casual nature of the final day, hadn't even brought books back to class.

"If I had it my way," Charlie says, loosening his tie, "I'd end school right after finals. We've done nothing for the past two days."

"It's not too bad, considering." Todd says as they walk back from P.E. "I'm glad we have the extra time to pack, and who wants their last impression to be, like, crying after a final? Oh, bummer, Nolan's coming — look."

The thin, severe silhouette of Nolan cuts towards their emergent P.E. class. Within minutes, his striped suit becomes visible, then his expression. He looks determined.

"Ah, shit — here, let's all lag back." Meeks says, ushering the group to the back. At first, Charlie is worried that Nolan's there to drag him to his office to personally make him wait for his father, but Nolan falls in step with the P.E. teacher, speaking in hushed tones. As they approach the school building, Neil notices a maintenance door and points them all towards that, and like a group of mice, they hunch over and find themselves between cleaning solutions and various buckets.

"What if they look for us?" Knox says, looking incredulously at Neil. Neil shrugs.

“Last day. I know Bill O’Mackey’s completely shaved off.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t expelled?” Meeks asks.

“Well, now you mention it…”

“Shut up!” Pitts says, as Neil trails off. “Why we’re here in the first place—”

“I mean, Nolan wasn’t technically looking for us. Maybe he wanted to scold Mr. Johnson for not making us play enough badminton.” Knox adds. Charlie kicks him.

“Better safe than sorry, I say.” he says, sitting down on an overturned bucket. “It’s already three, and my meeting’s supposed to be at five.”

“It’s probably more conspicuous that all five of us are here, though.” Todd says thoughtfully. “A few of us should leave.”

They decide that Knox, Todd, and Meeks will leave first, then Pitts, then Neil and Charlie. Then, they all fall quiet. Very slowly, Knox pushes the door open and peers behind it. The sliver of light it lets in is blinding. As Knox picks his way past the door, Pitts pushes his ear against the opposite wall, listening for voices in the hallway.

Knox and Todd make it out safely, but as soon as Meeks steps his foot out, Pitts begins flailing his arm from the opposite side of the cramped room. Meeks doesn’t notice, focused on his imminent exit, and so Pitts doubles his efforts. In his desperation, he knocks over a massive bottle of cleaning solution, which lands, cracked open, on Neil. Neil curses loudly. Meeks flips around at the noise.

“What was that?” A voice says, dangerously close to the closet.

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Charlie mutters.

“Young man?” The voice says again. Meeks turns to face it, outside.

“Uh. Yessir?”

“What are you doing in the janitor’s closet?” Charlie recognizes the voice as their Calc teacher’s — Mr. Scharman.

“I — uh. Nothing. I got lost.” Meeks answers.

“Are you not a senior?” Mr. Scharman asks. Charlie cringes.

“I am, yessir.”

“And you got lost—”

“Yessir.”

“—in this school that you’ve attended since your freshman year. In a restricted area.” Meeks audibly gulps.

“Yessir,” he says, after a moment. It’s disturbingly quiet, but then the door of the supply closet flies open, and Charlie, Pitts, and Neil are met with the reddened face of their professor.

“CONSPIRING!” Mr. Scharman accuses. Charlie looks at Neil and Pitts, who, trying to straighten himself out, sends three brooms, a mop, and two more bottles of sharp smelling cleaning solution to the floor.

An hour later finds the four of them — Meeks, Pitts, Charlie, and Neil (smelling of cleaning solution,) outside Nolan’s office, with Mr. Scharman inside. They can hear Mr. Scharman’s voice, muffled, get increasingly passionate.

“What’s he care?” Neil whispers.

“I flipped him the bird after the Calc final.” Meeks admits. “I also prank called him in the middle of Pitts’ final—pretended to be a doctor, regretfully informing him that his daughter’s pregnant.”

“You what?” Neil asks.

“Is she?” Charlie asks.

“No, but at first Scharman really believed it. Meeks had a megaphone next to the phone and everything so the whole class could hear the conversation.” Pitts says.

“How did he find you out?” Charlie asks, incredulous.

“I mean, I don’t know his daughter’s name… so. Also McAllister found me stashing the megaphone.”

Neil snorts, and then the group falls silent. Just as Charlie considers making a break for it he hears the unmistakable sound of footprints approaching the door. As he opens it, Nolan smiles slowly.

“Enter.” He says. The group follows him in, looking at one another, and around the wood paneled office. Nolan, standing, has an air of

triumph around him as he surveys the group. Charlie elects to avoid Nolan's eyes, surveying the contents of his desk. He's acquired quite a few end-of-the-year gifts, it seems.

"So." He says. Charlie tries to school his face into something rather innocent looking, but, catching his reflection in a window, realizes he's made a face that makes it seem like he's rather constipated.

"Have a seat." Nolan commands. Each of them sit in the chairs before Nolan's desk. Charlie gets a cheap wooden one, and Neil smiles smugly at him from a plusher, leather one.

"Mr. Scharman has just been speaking to me about your behavior earlier." The group says nothing. Charlie hears Pitts loudly sigh, and notices with a start that Mr. Scharman is still in the room, half-hidden between two bookshelves.

"He tells me that he found you four in a supply closet, conspiring."

The group remains silent.

"Apparently, some cleaning solution was missing as well."

Charlie rolls his eyes, and sees Meeks feign surprise.

"Would you four like to explain why it was that the solution was missing?"

"Not really." Pitts says.

Nolan's eyes bore into them. "Perhaps," he says, "tell me what prank you planned? Should I be on the lookout for slippery hallways, perchance? Maybe warn the kitchen?"

Charlie doesn't really want to tell Nolan they were running from him. Absolutely does not want to tell him that he planned on ditching today's parent meeting. It seems no one else does either: there's a long silence.

"Should'a paid more attention the tour day." Pitts says. "Took a wrong turn, bumped into some stuff."

"What were you doing hiding in a supply closet?" Nolan asks, taking none of Pitts' lie. "No student is allowed in the supply closets."

"Why not?" asks Charlie. "S'not like there's drugs in there." Immediately he regrets speaking.

“I have put up with enough from this little group.” Nolan snarls, moving behind the group and gripping Charlie’s shoulders menacingly. “Sneaking out at night,” he moves to Neil. “Prank calling teachers,” he moves to Meeks. To Pitts: “Pilfering materials, engineering illicit technology.”

He seems like he’s about to continue, smiling horribly, when suddenly a pebble clinks against the outside of Nolan’s window.

“Oh fuck no.” Pitts mutters.

Nolan turns around to observe the disruption.

Another pebble arcs perfectly in the air before tapping at the window.

Nolan moves towards the window. Charlie, utterly bewildered, holds his breath, hoping against hope that it isn’t Knox and Todd throwing pebbles. Another pebble hits. Nolan throws a sharp look behind him, at the still seated group, and then begins opening the window, presumably to yell at the culprits. Charlie looks behind him at Scharman, who watches Nolan. Charlie waits for the blow to fall — he’s certain Nolan will find a way to blame the group for the interruption.

As Nolan wrenches the window open, another pebble — larger, this time, it looks — arcs up again, and Nolan’s too slow to back up before it hits him right between his eyes. Charlie knows a distraction when he sees one, and in one… two… three…

Nolan erupts, flinging the window open and shaking his fist at the students below.

“Expulsions, all of you — you expect to graduate— we’ll see about your record—” he spits, face turning brilliantly red. Before he can turn his vitriol towards Charlie and his friends, Charlie purposely knocks over a particularly verdant potted hydrangea (likely a gift,) and shoots up from his seat.

“Fuck it! Go!” He yells, tugging Neil, closest to him, up out of his seat. Meeks, the quickest, is at the door first, fumbling with the brass knob. Scharman looks stunned, turning towards Nolan, and just as Nolan makes towards them, Meeks gets the door open, and the group pushes forward, then out of the office.

“Dorms! Now!” Neil commands, and they all spill down the hallway. Residual students still occupy corners or walk slowly to their dorms,

and Charlie is grateful for their presence — all the better to hide by.

The group, running, takes the following corner wide, and Charlie laughs with adrenaline as Meeks grips his sweater so as not to crash into the wall. Neil, in the lead, nearly trips on the corner to the dorm hallway, but catches himself on the wall and jumps the steps down. They descend like invaders into the dorms; Charlie barrels through his door to a surprised Cameron, then takes whatever bags are easiest and exits. He briefly worries that Nolan and Scharman will be waiting in the hall, but, seeing that they aren't, shoulders into Knox's room, slams shut his bags, and hopes Knox is done packing.

The four meet in the hallway, breathless and carrying bags. Then, Pitts flings his head behind him at a noise.

Scharman comes first, his polished shoes tapping furiously on the flooring as he makes towards the group, and Nolan, red faced, is behind him. Their eyes widen with victory as they see the students with their incriminating bags.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Charlie says, then immediately splits, leading a chase down the hallway. Burdened by four bags, he's quickly overtaken by Meeks and Pitts, but Pitts sees the disadvantage and grabs one of Knox's bags out of Charlie's hands. Meeks does the same for Neil, who had taken Todd's luggage.

All in all, it's a rather even chase — the students, though young, are burdened with their clunky, expensive bags, and the professors, though free from awkward baggage, are weakened with age.

"Keating's office," Neil pants, as they pass a group of ogling sophomores. The more they run, the more cumbersome the baggage becomes.

"Yeah, yeah," Charlie affirms, switching to a sort of half walk-half run up the hallway. Some students still linger, but less so as they approach the teacher's offices. Though evening hasn't fallen, Charlie seems to notice the hall getting darker, and he constantly turns his head to ensure Nolan and Scharman haven't caught up. When they clear a corner before the teachers have made it into that particular hallway, Meeks, muttering "Go, go, go," leads them into another supply closet, right behind the corner.

Immediately, Charlie is fearful: it feels rather obvious, to go into a supply closet, but they don't have the stamina to make the fifty feet before the next turn without getting caught. They all shut up this

time: Charlie doesn't dare breathe.

After about five seconds of silence, (even though it feels longer,) the sounds of Scharman and Nolan's jog reaches them, and though the door is closed, Neil grabs the handle and pulls it back so it can't be opened. Nolan and Scharman stop midway through the hallway, then double back. Charlie doesn't know whether to keep his eyes trained on the door or squeezed tightly shut. Pitts looks around like a frightened horse, and Charlie prays he doesn't knock over more cleaning solution: this supply closet is notably less organized and more stuffed than the other one.

They hear hushed voices — Nolan seems to curse a few times. Then, someone's shoes click towards the closet, and Neil grips tighter. Charlie decides he doesn't want to see this, and screws his eyes closed. He then has the chilling realization that they didn't lock the door — hopefully, Neil holds tight enough.

"You think they're in here?" Scharman asks. Nolan seems to grunt.

"Be right stupid of them, if they were." A second pair of shoes click towards the door. Charlie prays. After a moment, someone tries the door. Charlie flings his eyes open — Neil grimaces and leans back with the handle with all of his might.

After the knob jiggles a little, the footsteps retreat.

"Can't have gotten in there — it's locked." says Scharman. "At least one of these janitors does their job." Nolan curses again.

"Imbeciles — entirely disobedient — call their parents —" he mutters. In the dark, Charlie sees Meeks and Neil meet each other's eyes. They wait a few minutes in the closet before Pitts whispers, "Do you think they'll return with a janitor and keys?"

That motivates them to move: they distribute luggage so they have about equal weight each, and sneak out of the closet. Unfortunately, Pitts knocks over a bucket and what smells like bleach on the way out, but they quickly shut the door and quietly make their way towards Keating's office.

They make it without any more disturbances, except a junior student who scrunches his nose at the odor of bleach that reeks from Pitts. Pitts saluts him. Every few yards, they check to make sure they aren't being followed by a teacher, then race up the steps toward the teacher's offices. Charlie hopes a memo warning of such disobedient

students as them hasn't already been sent out. Upon reaching the door to Keating's office, they rap on the front door enough times to convey their slightly frantic state of mind. It then swings open, and Keating's face behind it is just as comforting as it's always been.

"Boys?" Keating asks, looking slightly bewildered but mostly welcoming. "You're a tad later than I expected."

Neil, Keating's unspoken favorite, steps forward. "Sorry sir, may we speak to you inside? It's rather time sensitive."

Keating's office, too, looks like it always does. Old fashioned lamps illuminate piles of books and squashy armchairs, and the long, warm shadows make the cramped room look larger, more full of secrets. The only thing that betrays the end of the school year is Keating's desk. No longer are there stacks of ungraded essays waiting to be read, but the desk is clean, polished, and devoid of clutter.

"I'm here for another few weeks," Keating says, noticing the group gaze around the room. "Otherwise you'd see me all packed and ready to leave for summer."

"Are you going anywhere?" Meeks asks absently.

"Yes—Rome, actually, to see an old friend, but I don't think my travel plans are why you're here." Keating says indulgently.

"Yeah—" Neil says, beginning to explain. He recounts the storage closet, their discovery, how Nolan got exceedingly angry, how some savior of a student pelted pebbles at Nolan's window. How they made a break for it, running and packing up, (when Neil mentions that, they all seem to remember they're holding suitcases, and place them on Keating's floor,) hiding again in a storage closet, then making for Keating's office.

"Oh no." Keating says, at the end of it. "I'm afraid I know who threw those pebbles."

"Was it Knox and Todd?" Charlie asks. Mr. Keating looks gravely at them. "Goddamnit." Charlie mutters.

"Well we've got to find them and bring them here." Meeks says. "I know Nolan said something about expulsions… dunno how serious he was, though.." Charlie shoots up from where he had sunk into one squashy chair.

“Oh, damn!” He says. “I completely forgot. Isn’t Nolan going to call our parents?”

“Oh fuck.” Pitts says.

“What time is it?” asks Charlie.

“Four forty-six.” Meeks replies, craning his neck to see the grandfather clock on the wall.

“Ah, fuck.” Charlie says. “I can’t go to that meeting now, I really can’t.”

“It’d be better if you and the rest could just leave the campus now.” Keating says. “Frankly, it’d be better if you already left, but there’s not much we can do…”

“Pardon me for interrupting, sir, but where are Todd and Knox?” Charlie notices a twinge in Neil’s voice that betrays his anxiety over his friends. Charlie can’t help but feel a sort of panic thinking of what Nolan may do to his friends if he found them. He takes a moment to pray they’re safe.

“I’ll search for them right now.” Keating says, with an air of finality. He looks around the room, considering the students, then says, “You all stay here. I’ll be back promptly, and then I suppose it’d be best to get you all to my house in Montpelier. I will also speak with Nolan and see what I can do about your graduation.”

He’s met with a chorus of thanks, and, with a wink, he leaves.

“Well,” Charlie says, after a beat. “That was royally stupid.”

“Who’s fault is that?” says Meeks.

“Oi—” says Neil.

“It doesn’t matter, honestly.” says Meeks. “It’s about time someone’s chucked a rock at Nolan. That man’s so antiquated, it’s honestly surprising he’s not been fired.”

“I mean, all those stunts with the paddle? It’d be one thing if he told the parents, but I hear he made some freshman last year bleed. Kid had to drop out.” says Neil.

“Yeah, Swenson, I think.” mutters Charlie, distractedly.

The four sit in silence for a little, slightly too on-edge to try and make one another laugh. Pitts loudly fidgets with a heavy-looking pen that he found on Keating's desk, taking it apart and putting it back together again.

Charlie, for one, keeps an ear finely attuned to the door, and he walks to keep an eye on the grounds outside. Keating's office has a window overlooking the courtyard, and Charlie scans the paved square for any sign of Knox and Todd.

The four pass some minutes silence, adjusting and readjusting their seats, glancing around the office, and counting their bags.

"I think I forgot to take socks," Meeks mutters absently.

Suddenly, the loudspeaker in Keating's office crackles, and Nolan's voice sounds down.

"REQUESTING MISTERS CHARLES DALTON, NEIL PERRY, STEVEN MEEKS, AND GERARD PITTS IN MY OFFICE, NOW, PLEASE."

"Shit." says Neil, then the office door swings open. Keating ushers in Todd and Knox, and looks quickly towards the window.

"Mr. Keating?" Asks Charlie,

"Yes?" He answers absently, then turns around, locks the door, and smooths his hands down the pleats of his trousers. "No, just one moment, Charlie, let me explain. Students, listen up." Todd and Knox look around and find seats around the room.

"None of you are going into Nolan's office. What we're going to do is pretend we were somewhere where we couldn't hear the announcement — if anyone asks, I'll say I've taken my star students for a walk to discuss their future in writing. We'll just have to get out of this building inconspicuously—hopefully, before Nolan makes another announcement. I trust some of you can drive?"

Charlie raises his hand.

"Good. I will give you the keys to my car. You will drive to the address I will give you momentarily — it's my house in Montpelier. There's no time to gather your things, so I hope you've taken enough on your mad dash here." Knox looks around, slightly worried, until he sees his luggage near Charlie's.

"I forgot socks." adds Meeks, unhelpfully.

“The issue is this. If you all go to Nolan’s office, there’s still a chance you’ll walk at graduation. If you do not, you’ll most definitely not be allowed to walk. If I am not fired, I will mail your graduation documents to the Montpelier house. If I am…” he trails off, and the society exchanges looks. “Well, if I'm fired for helping you, I suppose we’ll have different problems.”

“So, we’re not going to be able to walk at Graduation?” Meeks asks.

“This is where you have to make a choice.” says Keating, apologetically. “I suppose for some of you—Meeks, likely, and maybe Pitts—you won’t get into too terrible of trouble if you go to Nolan’s. You’d still be able to walk. For some others,” he looks pointedly at Charlie, and then Knox, “I don’t think even the most earnest of groveling will get you out of Nolan’s bad opinion. I don’t think you two have a choice.

“For those of you who do, I must inform you that your presence in Nolan’s office will likely worsen the punishment for the others. I cannot tell you what to do—it is well within your right to want to graduate properly.”

“If it gets the others in trouble, then hell no.” says Pitts. Meeks nods.

“Right, then that’s settled.” says Keating. He visibly relaxes, the glances around the room again. “I suppose the only thing now is to get you out of here. All of you, bundle up—cover your faces.”

The group looks around, bemused, then searches their respective luggage for baseball caps, sunglasses, and high necked jackets — ridiculous, maybe, but perhaps enough to save them from first-glance recognition.

Charlie looks at Knox, who slicks his hair back, pops his collar, and throws on a pair of Raybans, and laughs.

“How do I look?” Knox says, winking overtop of his glasses. Charlie stammers, laughing.

“I don’t know. Like an idiot James Bond.”

“Dress for the job you want, right?”

Charlie chuckles, looking Knox over. Despite the ridiculousness, he

looks really good, all relaxed and cocky. Charlie imagines that this is what Knox'll wear when they're in California, except maybe with a few more buttons on his shirt undone, and the collar not starched. The starched collar, popped, looks absolutely insane.

"Hey, I don't wanna see this judgement. You look ridiculous. I hope you're happy with that look." Knox says at Charlie's silence.

Charlie snorts, and looks down at his own bulky red turtleneck (which he's already sweating through,) and baseball hat. "Yeah, I'm happy with my look. Pretty happy with yours, too."

"What will people think when we're leaving?" asks Todd, concerned.

"The idea is they won't pay attention to us." Says Pitts, tugging on the sleeve of his jacket. "Hopefully if we walk quickly but casually enough…"

"I'll also be taking you out to a teacher's entrance, so there won't be as many students." Says Keating, grabbing his keys.

Except, when they walk out of the office, the hallways are pretty packed with meandering students. Charlie feels abruptly stupid, walking around as if a knit turtleneck will make the entire student body forget he's expressly wanted by Nolan. Meeks and Pitts look at each other, and Charlie gets the impression they, like him, feel abruptly cornered.

"Quickly, now." says Keating, walking with enough purpose to part the assorted students. Charlie tucks his chin into his sweater (which, again, is uncomfortably warm,) and drags his bags behind him, trying to keep pace with Keating.

"AGAIN," crackles the loudspeaker, even louder now, in the hallway: "REQUESTING MISTERS CHARLES DALTON, NEIL PERRY, STEVEN MEEKS, AND GERARD PITTS IN MY OFFICE, IMMEDIATELY." Several faces turn to look at the group as they hurry down the hallways, turning into smaller corridors that even Charlie had never visited before. By the time they reached the teacher's parking lot, they had broken into a light jog, which was conspicuous but better than getting caught.

"Here," Keating says, eyes shifting. He presses the keys into Charlie's hand and points him towards his black car. "Don't crash it. The address is 140 Main Street. There's a key under the mat. Go, quickly, I'll check on you there this evening, though probably late. Do make

yourselves at home, though I regret you may have to go grocery shopping."

Charlie looks at the pale faces of his friends, heart still beating quickly. It's finally Neil who shoves Knox and Todd forward.

"Go, you guys. Let's put our luggage in the trunk." he says, taking charge. Charlie, breathing uncharacteristically fast, hauls ass over to the car and unlocks the trunk, shoveling his shit and then the various bags of his friends in, until he can't fit anymore.

"Pitts, you think you can cram your shit in by your feet?" he asks. Pitts grimaces but nods. Charlie hops into the driver's seat and adjusts it to his liking, then waits as his friends slam the doors shut, complaining about the cramped space, but moving quickly despite.

To put it mildly, Charlie drives like hell. He puts his foot on the gas and careens out of the parking lot, very nearly bringing the Ford offroad into a copse of trees.

"What the hell?" says Neil, from the passenger seat. "I thought you said you could drive?"

"Yeah, not well," Charlie says, "Hang on, everyone."

Charlie doesn't think he's ever driven so fast. Once he makes it off the school grounds, he whizzes around corners and runs reds when there's no-one else at the intersection, inviting a chorus of verbal abuse from his passengers, but the fast car, and more than that, the feeling of escaping Welton forever, makes his heart soar.

With one eye on the road, he watches the scenery change, from the small suburban town outside Welton, past suburbs and brownstones and stretches of road flanked only by summer-green leaves. During the drive, the sky changes from bright blue of the afternoon to a slightly softer light: shadows stretch and trees rustle languidly, and every mile that Charlie puts behind them and the school lifts a weight from his chest.

When they finally make it to the house, ("What the fuck's the exit for Montpelier?" "Charlie do not fucking cross four lanes of traffic right now, I swear to god.") the sun still clings to the sky, throwing gold light onto the red-white house.

"Looks pretty old." says Meeks, peering up at the distinctly New-England, red-bricked, cramped sprawl of a house as Charlie pulls

crookedly into the driveway.

“We are never letting you drive again.” says Todd, scrambling to open the backseat door. “I genuinely feared for my life on that drive,” but he’s laughing.

“Suit yourself, Whitman,” Charlie says, unable to stop a grin. “Did I not get us where we needed to go?” he chuckles, looking over at his friends. One by one, they stumble out of the car. Gradually, smiles erupt on their faces; the boys exchange looks and take in the street the house is on, relishing the complete change of scenery. Neil pulls Todd in as soon as he’s extricated himself and stretched, looping an arm around his shoulders and laughing, then whooping loudly.

“WE DID IT! WE GOT OUT!” Neil crows. The boys all break into cheers, and fall into each other, hugging and whooping and laughing, and they descend into the house, and Charlie, holding Knox to him, hasn’t felt this free, ever.

The boys settle in, for a sense of the word, rather quickly. They throw their things on the couch in the living room, and their jubilant mood definitely colors the house in a kinder light than is necessarily warranted. Overall, the house is rather cramped, trying for a New England, Greek-Revival, sprawling grandeur on a relatively small plot of land. The rooms are cramped, ceilings low, in the fashion of 1800s constructions, and at least a third of the rooms are entirely wood paneled and octagonal, for some reason. The whole ground floor save the kitchen and sunroom is carpeted with a rather ugly dark green. Small rooms are furnished with timelessly tasteless pieces, but the effect is cozy. It feels like a sanctuary, the way Keating’s office did. Like the office, the whole house is cluttered and warm, and Todd makes a point to open a bunch of windows and set his and Neil’s things in a room.

“Tut tut tut” says Pitts, shaking his head. “This is an old house with thin walls, and I’m not listening to you two fuck — anyone in a relationship is NOT allowed to share a room.”

“Oi!” says Knox. “You can’t make that rule!”

“Meeks?”

“Oh fuck no. Leave room for Jesus.”

“Betrayal.” says Neil mournfully.

“Hey,” says Charlie, “Majority rules. I’m sharing with Knox.”

“Like Hell you are,” says Meeks. “I’ll tell Keating you scarred all his ancestors’ ghosts.”

“Ew.” says Pitts, importantly.

“Who says anyone died in here?” says Todd.

“No, he’s right. This place is definitely crawling with ghosts.” says Knox.

“Oh, shut up,” says Neil, shoving Knox lightly while Charlie mutters “Dictatorship of the engineering kids,”

Ultimately, there are only two bedrooms, so Knox and Charlie end up crammed in the same room as Meeks, and Pitts ends up with Todd and Neil. Both rooms are upstairs, on opposite ends of a long hallway bisected by a rather ostentatious, if cramped, circular stairwell.

“Oi, Pitts!” shouts Meeks, from the upstairs hall. “Do me the honor of becoming my boyfriend, so we’re not stuck babysitting!”

“Anything for you, baby,” Pitts says sarcastically, chucking Meek’s toiletry bag across the hallway. It hits Meeks squarely in the chest.

“And they say romance is dead.” quips Knox, walking up the stairs.

The two bedrooms look relatively the same, both (like the rest of the upstairs,) carpeted entirely in beige, but they both have bay windows overlooking the rest of the property — about a half acre, fenced in and complemented in part by a tiled sunroom and wooden porch. The acreage is rather wild, with long grasses and wildflowers and a small, overgrown pond, but it looks cozy. The furniture is cramped, as could be expected, all an ugly, aged wood.

“The fuck is this?” asks Charlie, pointing at the looming headboard on the bed. “This thing is taller than me.”

“Hey,” says Neil, peeking his head in. “Don’t bite the hand that feeds. Why do you lot get a bigger room? Pitts, come over here—”

“Nah,” says Pitts, glancing in on the way to the shared bathroom. It’s just they don’t have three wardrobes.”

“Why do you have three wardrobes?” Charlie asks. “Let me see. I bet there’s ghosts in one of them.”

“Shut up, Charlie,” says Todd.

Charlie does shut up, but not for long. Honor-bound to uphold his reputation as an insufferably lovable asshole, he soon begins complaining of hunger, and the group makes it to and from a Wayside Restaurant, a white and red sign reads in block letters. (“Creative,” remarks Knox,) with boxes of either sandwiches or cuts of meat with potatoes, and a whole pie they were convinced to try. They eat on the porch as the sky mellows into pastels and the sun disappears behind bushy trees. There’s only a half slice of pie left before the sky gets to a dusky lilac, and the grass starts to light up with fireflies.

“Whoa,” Knox breathes, from beside Charlie. The fireflies dot around and dance, more appearing as the sky darkens further. Knox, leaning against Charlie, is completely enamored. And Charlie’s enamored with him. Eventually, someone goes inside to fetch blankets, draping one over Charlie and Knox. Charlie, though glancing sporadically at the light show, watches Knox, the way the dying light softens his face, makes his hair glow.

Finally, Knox extracts himself from Charlie, toes off his shoes, and wanders into the yard, reaching out as if to touch the lightning bugs. He’s so beautiful like this, he looks like a dream, like a painting, maybe. Charlie’s heart swells and he’s transfixed.

“Come back here,” he calls.

“No,” says Knox, “Come out here with me.”

So Charlie does, unable to do anything but whatever Knox asks of him. That doesn’t stop him from shoving Knox slightly off balance once he reaches him.

“Look around you,” Knox says, and Charlie has to admit, it’s something else entirely, to be in the middle of it. The porch light isn’t on and it’s gone completely dark, so it seems like it’s just the two of them, standing together, surrounded by a million dancing lights. When Charlie meets Knox’s eyes again, he’s grinning like he can’t help it, and Charlie can’t help but reach up and pull him, rough, into a kiss.

Knox breaks out of it grinning. “Tell me you love me.”

“I love you, you idiot.”

A bright moon rises and the porch light turns on before they decide to head inside. On the porch, still, is Neil and Todd, Todd awake still,

whispering to a sleeping Neil and petting his hair. Charlie quietly crams the remaining half-slice of pie into his mouth, winking at Todd, who flips him the bird and mouths I wanted that, you dick. Inside, Meeks and Pitts talk in low voices, chuckling now and again. Meeks catches them going up the stairs.

“For the love of God,” he warns, “Do not fuck in that room. I’ll kill you, I mean it.”

“Oh fuck off,” says Charlie, laughing. “We won’t.”

They’re getting ready for bed when Charlie checks the clock — 12:26 AM — and remembers Keating saying he’d come check in on them. Knox is busy messing with his hair, and Charlie is on the verge of reminding him of Keating’s promise…but the evening was so perfect, and he feels so light, and he didn’t want to worry over nothing.

“You’re thinking loudly,” Knox says, finally sliding into bed.

“Don’t worry about it.” Charlie says, smiling, and nestling himself close against Knox, who adjusts in turn.

“Okay,” Knox says quietly, wheedling a foot in between Charlie’s calves. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” Charlie says. He feels Knox fall asleep, his breathing deepening and arm growing heavy around Charlie. But Charlie stays awake for some time, listening for a car in the driveway.

A car never comes.

Chapter End Notes

So I'm back.

I know it's been literally years since an update — thank you all for sticking by this and thank you thank you thank you to everyone continuing to comment!

Again, shoutout to Dipshit, for whom I write. I do hope to update more consistently from now on, so keep an eye out!

And — Wayside Restaurant is a real thing! It's the oldest restaurant in Montpelier, Vermont. I've never been, so I can't attest to the quality, but if you ever find yourself in Vermont, please tell me how it is.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!